Judaism, environmentalism and the environment: Mapping and analysis
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Chapter Four

Jewish Attitudes to the Environment in the Bible's Narrative

Beside the halakhic Torah texts referred to in the previous chapter, additional insights into Jewish attitudes to the environment can be gleaned from the Bible's other writings. Many references to the present subject are contained in its narrative, prophetic and wisdom texts, and may be found by reading these from the viewpoint of the environmental discipline.

Because Halakha defines the normative behavior of observant Jews, the Torah's halakhic rules and their development over the centuries lend themselves better than other Bible texts to analysis of Jewish attitudes to the environment. As a result, little attention has been given in modern Jewish publications to the non-halakhic texts.

As the non-legal parts of the Bible permit more, and wider, interpretations than the legal sections, greater familiarity with environmental thinking and motifs is required for analyzing attitudes toward the environment. This may explain why contemporary Jewish writers have displayed faint interest in tackling these texts.

Emphasis on approaches and tools

A systematic review of the entire Bible - and, of necessity, its main Jewish commentators also - with regard to its relevance to the field of environment would require the effort of several scholars over many years. A main concern of this chapter, therefore, is to demonstrate by means of examples the approaches and tools by which such an effort can be undertaken.

In this chapter, I have separated the analysis of Bible texts from that of commentators. This will lead to some repetition; for instance, discussion on the Flood and the Ten Plagues will be found in both sections.

In the process, a more complete and detailed picture of Jewish attitudes toward the environment, as we currently understand it, will emerge than can be obtained from Halakha alone. From the strategist's vantage point the various types of classical Jewish texts reflect similar and/or complementary values, even if their modes of
expression differ. Jewish observance and thought combined offer a broad perspective on the present subject.

**Different approaches**

In this chapter, a number of methods are indicated which facilitate a more informed perspective on Jewish attitudes toward the environment in the Bible. It may be presumed that most of the Torah's Halakhot with evident environmental aspects have been identified by now. However, this is not necessarily the case either with other Bible texts or, more particularly, with those of Bible commentators in both the Midrash and later literature.

The focus in this chapter is mainly on some of the Bible's narratives, as they contribute the most to our subject. However, some reference will also be made to other texts. Four different approaches are suggested below which, when combined, demonstrate the variety of views of environmental relevance expressed in the Bible.

1) One can review those stories in the Bible with obvious environmental aspects, and analyze them from a modern environmental viewpoint—occasionally even with the methods, tools and categorization of modern environmentalism. Such an approach helps in some cases to identify where religious and environmental aspects overlap and diverge. My analysis will compare environmental and religious thinking in some specific cases, in an attempt to clarify the way in which these two very different worlds approach the subject.

This, in turn, provides additional perspective on interpreting Jewish attitudes to environmental issues. In commenting on the non-legal sections of the Bible, I attempt to stay close to the 'plain meaning' of the written text (*peshat*). This approach has a long tradition, and was used systematically by Rashi, the most important classical Bible commentator. *Peshat* means different things at different times. The present generation often conceptualizes the literal meaning of the texts differently from the way previous generations have done, sometimes using tools from disciplines which were not yet established as such in earlier times.

In the Bible one finds perceptions relevant to many disciplines, including law, history, education, botany, geography, literature, psychology, architecture, art, medicine, epidemiology, warfare, social policies, economics and marketing. Similarly, in addition to the halakhic issues already referred to in the previous chapter, concerns which nowadays have been grouped within the new sphere of environmentalism are also touched upon in a number of places.

Looking at the Bible's narrative from a modern environmental viewpoint is not a classical method of interpretation. However, it
does fit a long tradition of ever-widening interpretation of these texts. As new disciplines have emerged (e.g. psychology), their methods of analysis have been applied to Bible texts and have found broad acceptance. Similarly, the environmental discipline also enables us to obtain more insights into an ancient text which lends itself to multiple interpretations.

2) A further indication of classical Judaism's views on the environment can be gained by reviewing the Bible texts included in the Orthodox prayer book. The prayers of environmental relevance usually refer to nature and, to a lesser extent, to sacrifices. The rabbis who composed the prayers in post-Biblical times selected for the task those Biblical concepts which they wished most to emphasize.

3) Another approach is reviewing modern Jewish publications, to see how they interpret various non-halakhic passages in the Bible. This was my principal method when discussing environmental aspects of Halakha. Its contribution is limited, however, for the Biblical narrative.

4) Further insights can be obtained from the way in which different Jewish commentators have interpreted Bible texts with environmental relevance. Here, I limit myself to a few examples from some of the major commentators on such cases as the Creation, the Flood and the Ten Plagues. A systematic review of the Bible commentators can yield not only numerous insights; it may also permit a comparison of attitudes toward environmental matters between commentators, as well as mapping the development of attitudes over time.

The narrative and environmental elements

Several Bible stories can be related to specific environmental elements.

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I. The Narrative

The Biblical attitude toward the environment will be reviewed through the analysis of a number of subjects in the narrative:

a) The Paradise story
b) Nature
c) Natural resources
d) The position of animals
e) Pollution

a) The Paradise story

Here I shall apply the methodology of the modern environmental discipline to some Biblical narratives. Like any reality, Paradise and life in it can be analyzed speculatively with the tools of the environmental audit and environmental impact assessment, filling the gaps in the story with conjecture based on analogies from what we know about primitive society. When we ask what pollution man and animals created in the Garden of Eden, what risks to the ecosystem they represented, the answer seems to be: almost none.

Basic human needs like housing, transport and safety, as later became evident in early societies, did not yet exist in Paradise. Not even clothing was required. Humanity used neither textiles nor other materials. There was no potential scarcity of resources. Man needed neither products nor tools, so there were no production residues.

No artificial fertilizers or pesticides were required for plants to grow. Man and animals ate only vegetables. All that humanity used, which seems exclusively to have been food, was biodegradable and
probably metabolized into plants. There were no landfills. Animals did not require special protective measures, as they were not attacked by any other creatures. Biodiversity was thus maintained.

Most probably vegetarian, not-yet-violent man did not harm nature in any way or have any other impact on the ecosystem. Application of environmental analytical tools reveals a situation of perfect sustainability.

A similar situation is forecast at the end of days, as described in the prophecies of Isaiah: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together, with a little boy to herd them.” 3 and “The wolf and the lamb shall graze together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and the serpent’s food shall be earth. 4 In all My sacred mount nothing evil or vile shall be done.” 5 There is also a prophecy that there will no longer be conflicts between man and animal. 6

Obviously, from the modern environmentalist’s viewpoint, this story has an allegorical character. He is not aiming for a world in which the wolf will not eat the lamb and the lion will abstain from consuming the ox. Nonetheless, his professional tools permit analysis of this story – with one exception: the one element in the Paradise story which cannot be explained by environmental analysis is why this equilibrium is perturbed. Why would the eating of a fruit from a specific tree lead to expulsion from one’s original environment? One has to make suppositions here which have no basis in the text.

At this point, the religious viewpoint diverges from the environmental one. Humanity has not respected one of the very few Divine rules given to it; it has been tempted by an animal, and is consequently chased out of Paradise. This prohibition even has an environmental undertone: not all that one sees and desires should be consumed. However, this was not what the Divine message states explicitly: “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.’ ” 7

In the Jewish vision, Creation is perfect. God explicitly says so a number of times: “And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good.” 8 In his original environment, the Garden of Eden, man is obedient to God. He can live in harmony with God as he has not yet sinned. His transgression of a Divine commandment disrupts the world’s initial equilibrium.

For all the radical differences between modern environmentalism and Judaism, Paradise represents a common utopian ideal. In its
messianic thought, Judaism strives for a similar situation at the end of days. Environmentalism aims for full sustainability.

The values and motives of these two worlds of thought, however, are entirely different. Few Biblical stories illustrate these differences so well as that of Paradise. If we stay as close as possible to the written text and analyze the references to God, man and animal, the story can be summarized by saying that God made the world perfect. An animal persuaded man to take initiative to bring it out of equilibrium. Man could not even adhere to the few rules God had asked him to obey. Here the basic understanding of environmentalism and Judaism overlaps; but their interpretation of the story’s underlying values diverges significantly.

b) Nature

No word for ‘nature’ exists in the Bible. In line with current practice, I consider the inanimate which is not man-made, wild plants and animals as belonging to nature. The Bible holds a very specific position toward the undomesticated state of the living and the inanimate. It conveys two important messages as a result of nature’s being a creation of God’s: firstly, it is a manifestation of God’s majesty and should be recognized as such by man; secondly, in view of the above, God may use creation as He sees fit, and may change it at will. The latter means, for example, that He can transform non-living in living nature or destroy living nature at will.

Yehuda Feliks states that the large number of descriptions of nature in the Bible is only one of its remarkable aspects. He claims that “its ‘strength of expression’ regarding nature is unparalleled in any other contemporary literature, including that of Ancient Greece and the Ancient East.”

Not only is nature and its behavior controlled by God; so is all that happens, according to one of the Bible’s wisdom texts: “Just as you do not know how the lifebreath passes into the limbs within the womb of the pregnant woman, so you cannot foresee the actions of God, who causes all things to happen.”

Nature as a manifestation of God’s majesty

The rabbinical authorities who composed the prayers included in them a number of Bible texts of environmental relevance by current standards. Many of these express the concept that God has created the world and it should be a testimony to His majesty. Man should thank God who provides for him through nature. Many of these texts are from the Psalms.

In the daily morning prayer, it says: “all the gods of the peoples are things of nought, but the Lord made the heavens”, as well as
“Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad; and let them say among the nations, the Lord reigns.” 13 The latter verse is repeated in another prayer shortly thereafter.

One Psalm verse quoted in prayers says: “Sing to the Lord a song of praise, chant a hymn with a lyre to our God, who covers the heavens with clouds, provides rain for the earth, makes mountains put forth grass; who gives the beasts their food, to the raven’s brood what they cry for.” 14

Later in the same psalm, it says: “He lays down snow like fleece, scatters frost like ashes. He tosses down hail like crumbs – who can endure His icy cold? He issues a command – it melts them; He breathes – the waters flow.” 15

The next psalm states: “Praise Him, highest heavens, and you waters that are above the heavens. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for it was He who commanded that they be created.” 16

This is soon followed by a text from Nehemiah: “You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, the highest heavens, and all their host, the earth and everything upon it, the seas and everything in them. You keep them all alive, and the host of heaven prostrate themselves before you.” 17

Each day, a different psalm is read at the end of the morning service. Psalm 24, read on Sunday mornings, begins: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that it holds, the world, and its inhabitants. For He founded it upon the ocean and set it on the nether-streams.” 18

Shabbat prayers

The daily psalm read on Friday mornings and also included in the Friday night Shabbat inauguration service, contains a clear reference to nature as a Divine witness: “The ocean sounds, O Lord, the ocean sounds its thunder, the ocean sounds its pounding. Above the thunder of the mighty waters, more majestic than the breakers of the sea is the Lord, majestic on high.” 19

In the Friday night prayer welcoming Shabbat, a psalm is said in which the Divine impact on nature is variously described: “The voice of the Lord breaks cedars; the Lord shatters the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion, like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord kindles flames of fire; the voice of the Lord convulses the wilderness; the Lord convulses the wilderness of Kadesh; the voice of the Lord causes hinds to calve, and strips forests bare.” 20 This is a reflection both of God’s majesty and of how He may use nature as He sees fit.

In the Shabbat morning prayer, a psalm verse says: “The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims His handiwork.” 21 An-
other psalm verse in the same service says: “Praise the Lord of Lords... who made the heavens with wisdom, His steadfast love is eternal; who spread the earth over the water... who made the great lights... the sun to dominate the day... the moon and stars to dominate the night...” 22

The psalm read on the morning of the New Moon is almost entirely devoted to the same subject. As it is long, only a few verses are quoted here: “He made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows when to set. You bring on darkness and it is night, when all the beasts of the forests stir. He looks at the earth and it trembles; He touches the mountains and they smoke.” 23

Nature’s modification reflects majesty

In the narrative several modifications of nature – more commonly called miracles – also illustrate God’s majesty. These are considered both the proof and the result of God’s omnipotence. As an example, we might consider the institution of the rainbow, a sign of the covenant with humanity in the time of Noah. 24 This is an element of nature which carries a permanent guarantee to mankind.

Another example of God’s majesty in the modification of nature is when Moses is given his mission to free the Israelites from Egypt: “An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, ‘I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?’ ” 25

In order to make it clear to the Israelites which men God has chosen as their leaders, God orders the chieftains of each tribe to bring their staffs and deposit them in the meeting tent: “The staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout, and I will rid Myself of the incessant mutterings of the Israelites against you.” 26 By thus modifying inanimate nature, God wishes to teach a lesson to those who have rebelled against the authority of Moses and Aaron.

“The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Pact, and there the staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had sprouted: it had brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and borne almonds. Moses then brought out all the staffs from before the Lord to all the Israelites; each identified and recovered his staff.” 27

In order to instruct the heathen prophet, Balaam, not to curse the Israelites, an angel blocks his donkey’s way. Balaam hits the donkey three times, upon which “The Lord opened the ass’s mouth, and she said to Balaam, 28 ‘What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?’ Balaam said to the ass, ‘You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I’d kill you.’ The ass said to Balaam,
‘Look, I am the ass that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?’ And he answered, ‘No’ Then the Lord uncovered Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, his drawn sword in his hand; thereupon he bowed right down to the ground.” 29

As in the case of Moses, nature is modified here to teach an individual a lesson.

Later in the Bible, a variant of this motif occurs again when nature temporarily acquires extraordinary properties. Naaman, commander of the army of the King of Aram, is told by the prophet Elisha to bathe seven times in the Jordan in order to be cured of his leprosy: “So he went down and immersed himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had bidden; and his flesh became like a little boy’s, and he was clean.” 30

**Normality depends on obedience**

In the Bible, nature’s normal functioning is explicitly made subject to the Israelites’ obeying Divine commandments. If they do so, God will “grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil – I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle – and thus you shall eat your fill.” 31

Conversely, idolatry will lead to starvation: “Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord’s anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you.” 32

This message is so central to Jewish thought that these verses are included twice in the daily prayers in the *Shema*.

Nehama Leibowitz summarizes, in what she calls “A biblical lesson in ecology”, various aspects of the same motif by stating that the land is ruined by immorality and incest while bloodshed pollutes the land. Even beyond that, “The soil, the ecology is put out of joint by any kind of human misconduct.” 33

In the books of the prophets, the motif of God’s using nature as a punishment for idolatry is extensively described in Joel. When the Jews turn back to God and repent, it is prophesied, the pastures in the wilderness will again give grass and the trees bear fruit. Rain will fall as before the punishment, part of which consisted of an invasion of locusts, and the Israelites will even be compensated for the lost harvests: “And threshing floors shall be piled with grain, and vats shall overflow with new wine and oil. I will repay you for the years
consumed by swarms and hoppers, by grubs and locusts, the great army I let loose against you. And you shall eat your fill and praise the name of the Lord your God who dealt so wondrously with you — my people shall be shamed no more.”

Hosea prophesies that even the relationship between man and animal will change when the Israelites abandon idolatry: “In that day, I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; I will also banish bow, sword, and war from the land. Thus I will let them lie down in safety.”

Nature’s modification as punishment

The Bible contains many examples of nature’s modification as a tool of punishment. As Divine retribution for the behavior of its citizens, catastrophe befalls Sodom in Abraham’s time. The city is destroyed through a rain of sulphur and fire, because there are not ten righteous men in the city. Lot’s wife is turned into a pillar of salt, because — while being saved from the disaster — she does not obey the one Divine instruction specific to this occasion: not to look back.

The prophet Isaiah foretells that what happened to Sodom will happen again elsewhere: “And Babylon, glory of kingdoms, proud splendor of the Chaldeans, shall become like Sodom and Gomorrah overturned by God. Nevermore shall it be settled nor dwelt in through all the ages. No Arab shall pitch his tent there, no shepherds make flocks lie down there.”

Jeremiah also foretells how God will use nature to punish the idolatrous Israelites: “And I will appoint over them four kinds [of punishment] — declares the Lord — the sword to slay, the dogs to drag, the birds of the sky, and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy.”

Nature’s ways can become a punishment in many forms. So Ahijah prophesies about King Jeroboam of Israel: “Anyone belonging to Jeroboam who dies in the town shall be devoured by dogs; and anyone who dies in the open country shall be eaten by the birds of the air, for the Lord has spoken.” A similar prophecy is made to King Baasha and to King Ahab.

The Ten Plagues

The story of the Ten Plagues is the main example of a series of modifications of nature as a tool of punishment. A number of environmental disasters kill part of the Egyptian population, their slaves, animals and crops. These plagues do not affect the Israelites
living in the neighboring land of Goshen. The plagues end when the Egyptian ruler permits the Israelites to leave.

The bad effects of water and air pollution appear in several guises. When the river's water turns into blood, there is so much pollution that all "the fish in the Nile died. The Nile stank so that Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile; and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt." 44

While one of environmental science's major problems today is proving that certain sicknesses are caused by pollution, the motif of pollution's epidemiological character is stated explicitly in this story. Moses and Aaron take some handfuls of furnace soot, which becomes fine dust "and it caused an inflammation breaking out in boils on man and beast. The magicians were unable to confront Moses because of the inflammation, for the inflammation afflicted the magicians as well as all the other Egyptians." 45 Analyzed from the viewpoint of modern environmentalism it seems that air pollution causes an epidemic.

This series of events gains another dimension within the religious context. The Ten Plagues are a paradigm of the relationship of God, man and nature. Few other Biblical stories present in such detail the position of these three elements in Judaism. Humanity must obey God; if it does not, nature can be used in extraordinary ways to punish it.

Using nature at will

God can use nature at He sees fit. In this story, nature has no constancy, no rights: it is a Divine instrument. The inanimate rod can be turned into an animal: "The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'When Pharaoh speaks to you and says, "Produce your marvel", you shall say to Aaron, "take your rod and cast it down before Pharaoh." It shall turn into a serpent.' So Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded them: Aaron cast down his rod in the presence of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and it turned into a serpent." 46

Similarly, in the third plague the inanimate dust turns into lice: "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to Aaron: "Hold out your rod and strike the dust of the earth", and it shall turn to lice throughout the land of Egypt.' And they did so. Aaron held out his arm with the rod and struck the dust of the earth, and vermin came upon man and beast; all the dust of the earth turned to lice throughout the land of Egypt." 47

God can indeed do with nature and animals whatever He sees fit within His own schemes. The river can be made unlivable for fish, in order to punish man. For the same purpose, frogs can multiply,
and die in the houses, courtyards and fields after they have fulfilled their role: “The Nile shall swarm with frogs, and they shall come up and enter your palace, your bedchamber and your bed, the houses of your courtiers and your people, and your ovens and your kneading bowls.”¹⁸ They disappear at God’s will: “And the Lord did as Moses asked; the frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. And they piled them up in heaps, till the land stank.”⁴⁹

**Man and beast punished together**

Man and beast alike are punished during several of the plagues. Vermin affects both the Egyptians and their animals,⁵⁰ as does inflammation by boils.⁵¹ Hail strikes both of them if they are out in the open.⁵² Animals die in order to punish man: “the hand of the Lord will strike your livestock in the fields – the horses, the asses, the camels, the cattle, and the sheep – with a very severe pestilence.”⁵³

The essence of the religious message is very clear and is repeated several times: God can punish disobedient man by using nature against him. He can do so in a variety of ways and, if He wishes, can change the rules of nature that He created. For example, darkness hits the Egyptians in one place but not in another: “Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was; but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings.”⁵⁴

Animals can multiply, be moved, or even be killed at God’s will. The animal world is pitched against man in a variety of ways. Frogs invade the house; vermin infest him, insects invade the palace and ruin the crops; locusts eat the grasses of the field: “so that nothing green was left, of tree or grass of the field, in all the land of Egypt.”⁵⁵

Large parts of the ecosystem are damaged. The river Nile’s water becomes unusable; all field grasses and the fruit of trees are destroyed. At the same time, in the adjacent land of Goshen where the Israelites live, these effects do not take place. With the exception of the sixth plague, which can be considered an environmental paradigm of the epidemiology of pollution, the plagues are difficult to explain in an environmental analysis.

From the viewpoints of both modern environmentalism and Judaism, it is clear that a major disaster has befallen the Egyptians, their animals and the inanimate world. From the religious point of view, the motives for this are clear.

There are other religious elements which can have no place in environmental analysis and policies. Prayer by the right people may
succeed in eliminating the plagues. The Pharaoh could have prevented these disasters had he let the Israelites go.

The parting of the Red Sea

There is another striking example of a modification miracle in nature, to help the Israelites and punish their enemies, in the parting of the Red Sea: “The Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split, and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.” 56

Thereafter nature returns to itself. This is disastrous for the pursuing Egyptians, who drown in what is now the sea again: “Moses held out his arm over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But the Lord hurled the Egyptians into the sea.” 57

Korach’s punishment

During the crossing of the desert, when Korach leads a mutiny against Moses, the latter warns: “But if the Lord brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned the Lord.” 58

And indeed, the Torah tells us, an unnatural event does happen: “Scarcely had he finished speaking all these words when the ground under them burst asunder, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korach’s people and all their possessions. They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation.” 59

In the Biblical texts included in the prayers, we are also shown God’s ability to modify nature and use it as an instrument. As an example of the latter in Psalm 48, included in prayers on Mondays, we read: “With the east wind thou breakest the ships of Tarshish”. 60

The Flood

The Flood, the greatest natural disaster mentioned in the Bible, also expresses God’s use of nature as an instrument of punishment. Large parts of the ecosystem are destroyed. With the exception of Noah’s family, the whole of humanity is wiped out. 61

Through Noah, however, continuity with original man is maintained. Protected in the ark seven pairs of certain types of animals also remain; of others, only one pair. Thus biodiversity is assured, despite the catastrophe. The story does not reflect a minimalist envir-
onmentalist approach. Noah and his wife are not necessary for protecting biodiversity. Their children are all born long before they enter the ark. There is also no evident environmental reason why one would take into the ark seven pairs of one species of birds rather than another.

The earth – including the highest mountain tops – is entirely covered with water through the lengthy rainfall. The trees apparently remain alive as, after the heavy rain has ceased, the dove brings back a plucked olive leaf. After the rain has stopped, man sacrifices some of the remaining animals, but does not choose from among those of whom only one pair was taken on board the ark.

From a modern environmental viewpoint, there is not much more that can be said about the text as it is written, other than that a huge natural disaster has taken place, the reasons for which can only be guessed. Some people and animals escape miraculously.

There is also no reason why such an environmental disaster should not recur; there are only religious motives for its non-occurrence. God promises that the earth will not be destroyed again because of man, and whatever modifications He may make in nature, there will be some constant elements: “The Lord said to Himself: ‘Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man’s mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done. So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease.’” 62,63

The rainbow is the sign of this covenant with man: “I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.” 64 Isaiah repeats this promise, stressing, however, that other major modifications of nature remain possible: “For this to Me is like the waters of Noah: As I swore that the waters of Noah nevermore would flood the earth, so I swear that I will not be angry with you or rebuke you. For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but my loyalty shall never move from you, nor My covenant of friendship be shaken.” 65

Religious interpretation

From the religious viewpoint, the Bible text gives a clear explanation for the catastrophe. Man has sinned against God: “The Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. The Lord said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the men
whom I created—men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them’. But Noah found favor with the Lord.”

Nature is totally in God’s hands, and thus Noah is not needed to save the various species; but the story teaches humanity various lessons. One of these is that, while man and animal have sinned, a righteous man is chosen to play the key role in the survival of mankind and other species.

Through the destruction of both the human race and its property, God uses environmental disaster as a tool of punishment for the evil and violence that humanity has come to display. If this does not happen again in the future through a flood, it is not due to any act of man’s, but to God’s will. He says: “I will maintain My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

The main message which emerges is that, from the Biblical viewpoint, these environmentally-relevant aspects of the narrative do not stand alone: they need to be interpreted within the framework of religious values.

Some elements of this story seem to be repeating themselves in the modern preoccupations of largely secularized Western society that global warming will lead to the melting of the polar ice caps and flooding of the low-lying parts of the world. While the similarity of the motif is obvious, the causes for this concern and the values revealed in discussions around the issue, are quite different. Analysis of this lies outside the scope of this study.

**Beyond the Torah**

God’s *ad hoc* modification of nature to punish and/or reward continues after Moses’ death, although not on such a large scale. When Joshua leads the Israelites into the Land of Canaan, he battles with the kings of the Amorites. “He [Joshua] said in the presence of the Israelites: ‘stand still, O sun, at Gibeon, O moon, in the Valley of Ayalon!’”

The next verses describe God’s influence on the events of the day: “And the sun stood still and the moon halted, while a nation wreaked judgment on its foes— as is written in the Book of Yashar. Thus the sun halted in midheaven and did not press on to set, for a whole day; for the Lord fought for Israel. Neither before nor since has there ever been such a day, when the Lord acted on words spoken by a man.”

When the Israelites under Joshua lay siege to the city of Jericho, the troops march around the city for six days, with the priests blowing
rams' horns and walking before the holy Ark. On the seventh day, they march around the city seven times; Joshua tells them to shout loudly upon his signal: “So the people shouted when the horns were sounded. When the people heard the sound of the horns, the people raised a mighty shout and the wall collapsed. The people rushed into the city, every man straight in front of him, and they captured the city.”

In modern environmental terms, a plain reading of the story can be given as ‘excessive noise makes city wall collapse’. Its religious meaning, however, is totally different: if the Israelites obey the Lord, their enemies will be delivered into their hands.

In the time of the prophet Elijah, it is indicated that the rain is withheld because King Ahab and his predecessors have brought trouble on Israel “by forsaking the commandments of the Lord and going after the Baalim.” At Elijah’s request, Ahab organizes a demonstration on Mount Carmel where both the prophets of Baal and Elijah pray. The response from God to Elijah’s prayer is a fire descending from the sky which consumes “the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth; and it licked up the water that was in the trench.” The prophets of Baal are seized and slaughtered. Thereafter, “the sky grew black with clouds; there was wind, and a heavy downpour fell.”

**Jonah’s individual lessons**

So far we have largely seen how God uses the modification of nature to reward or punish man in smaller or larger groups. In the case of the prophet Jonah, a sequence of modifications of nature take place – rather than a single one, as was the case with Moses’ burning bush and Balaam’s speaking donkey – in order to teach an individual a lesson.

Jonah does not want to travel to Nineveh and tell its inhabitants that the city is going to be punished. He therefore flees on a ship going to Tarshish, but is taught a lesson through an event of nature: “But the Lord cast a mighty wind upon the sea, and such a great tempest came upon the sea that the ship was in danger of breaking up.”

Jonah is thrown overboard by the sailors and “the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah.” The prophet goes to Nineveh and speaks his prophecy; the people of Nineveh repent, which displeases him. To teach Jonah a further lesson, God interferes in nature once again: “The Lord God provided a ricinus plant, which grew up over Jonah, to provide shade for his head and save him from discomfort. Jonah was very happy about the plant. But the next day at dawn...
God provided a worm, which attacked the plant so that it withered. And when the sun rose, God provided a sultry east wind; the sun beat down on Jonah's head, and he became faint." 77

All these references to modifications of nature can be summarized in the concept that as the creator of the world, God can do with it as He wishes. Nature can serve a multitude of purposes. Heaven and earth, moon and sun, must obey Him. Man and beast are fed by His will.

**Perception of ecosystem components**

The Bible contains many aspects of environmental relevance other than the modification of nature. One can analyze the references in it to the ecosystem or part of it, and thus obtain a view of how the desert, trees, animals, etc. are perceived in the classical Jewish world of thought.

Trees play a particularly important role, from the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise, through Abraham's oak to the story of Jonah. Often metaphoric use is made of them. In Ezekiel's visions, the righteous and the wicked are compared to trees: "Thus said the Lord God: I am going to kindle a fire in you, which shall devour every tree of yours, both green and withered." 78

A few sentences later, the explanation is given: "Say to the land of Israel: Thus said the Lord: '... I will wipe out from you both the righteous and the wicked. In order to wipe out from you both the righteous and the wicked, my sword shall assuredly be unsheathed.' " 79

In another vision, Assyria is compared by Ezekiel to "a cedar in Lebanon with beautiful branches and shady thickets, of lofty stature with its top among leafy trees." 80

The prophet expounds on the description of this huge tree for another six verses, before moving on to its destruction due to arrogance: "Strangers, the most ruthless of nations, cut it down and abandoned it; its branches fell on the mountains and in every valley; its boughs were splintered in every watercourse of the earth; and all the peoples of the earth departed from its shade and abandoned it." 81

In Jeremiah, the believer is compared to an evergreen tree: "Blessed is he who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord alone. He shall be like a tree planted by waters, sending forth its roots by a stream: it does not sense the coming of heat, its leaves are ever fresh; it has no care in a year of drought, it does not cease to yield fruit." 82 In the Psalms, a similar comparison is made for the righteous: "Happy is the man who has not followed the counsel of the wicked... He
is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives. Not so the wicked; rather, they are like the chaff that wind blows away.”

Similarly, one can analyze the perception of the desert associated with nomadic life. Several prophets, such as Jeremiah, Hosea and Amos view certain aspects of nomadic life as ideal, speaking nostaligically about the Israelites’ past in the desert and their engagement with God. Amos condemns the luxury and easy aspects of city life. Hosea sees future salvation in a return to desert life.

One may ask several environmentally-relevant questions about the Israelites’ forty years in the desert. What was their impact on the wilderness? We have only a few indications in the narrative to analyze this. The story of the manna is one of these.

The desert may be looked at positively from a spiritual sense, but this still remains remote from the admiration of some modern environmentalists for the wilderness as an ecosystem. Fertile land which is not planted is viewed rather negatively in the Bible. Ezekiel states that God will see to it that the cities of the Land of Israel are rebuilt and the desolate wasteland tilled, not because the people merit it, but for God’s own sake.

The importance of a well-maintained ecosystem, in which the equilibrium between man and nature is viewed positively, is given a different perspective when God promises to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan: “I will not drive them out before you in a single year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply to your hurt. I will drive them out before you little by little, until you have increased and possess the land.”

Israelite misinterpretation of nature

In practice, the Israelites often display an attitude toward nature which is proscribed by Halakha: it forbids the sanctification of nature or elements thereof. As pointed out in the previous chapter, they are warned explicitly against various types of idolatry. Places of pagan worship are often located at prominent natural features, which they then sanctify: “You must destroy all the sites at which the nations you are to dispossess worshipped their gods, whether on lofty mountains and on hills or under any luxuriant tree. Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site.”

They transgress regularly. Sun, moon and stars are other elements of nature frequently mentioned in the Bible as the object of the
Israelites' idolatry. In the time of King Rehoboam, son of Solomon, the people of Judah commit sins: “They too built for themselves shrines, pillars, and sacred posts on every high hill and under every leafy tree; there were also male prostitutes in the land.” A later king of the same kingdom, Ahaz, follows suit: “He sacrificed and made offerings at the shrines, on the hills, and under every leafy tree.” His contemporary, Hosea, the last king of Israel, does the same. According to the Bible, these sins lead to the deportation of the country's inhabitants to Assyria.

The same motif emerges in the writings of various prophets. For example, in Isaiah: “You are children of iniquity, offspring of treachery – you who inflame yourselves among the terebinths, under every verdant tree; who slaughter children in the wadis, among the clefts of the rocks.” Another prophet who takes up this motif is Ezekiel: “And you shall know that I am the Lord, when your slain lie among the fetishes round about their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, under every green tree, and under every leafy oak – wherever they presented pleasing odors to all their fetishes.”

Natural resources

The Bible tells us a number of basic things about natural resources:

a) they are in God's hand
b) if people are dissatisfied with God-given natural resources, they may incur God's wrath
c) sometimes they are scarce and become a bone of contention
d) they should be used wisely for economic purposes
e) on a few occasions in times of war, there is a case for the destruction of natural resources which may serve the enemy.

Examples will be given of each of the above.

a) Resources are in God's hand

If nature is in God’s hand, so are natural resources: God can supply or withhold them. One important, explicit example of this is the manna in the desert, which is supplied and disposed of in precise ways.

The manna is like bread which rains down from the sky: “When the fall of dew lifted, there, over the surface of the wilderness, lay a fine and flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.” The Israelites gather it every morning: “each as much as he needed to eat; for when the sun grew hot, it would melt.”
From a modern environmental viewpoint, a material melting in the sun may call up associations with such phenomena as photo-deterioration and photo-degradation. An example of God's withholding natural resources as an expression of His wrath is found in Ezekiel: "And say to the people of the land: 'Thus said the Lord God concerning the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the land of Israel; They shall eat their bread in anxiety and drink their water in desolation, because their land will be desolate of its multitudes on account of the lawlessness of its inhabitants. The inhabited towns shall be laid waste and the land shall become a desolation; then you shall know that I am the Lord.' "

Water from the rock

Another example in the Torah's narrative of God's providing man with scarce natural resources relates to water, which He brings forth in several ways. "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Pass before the people; take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take along the rod with which you struck the Nile and set out. I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink'."

On another occasion, God tells Moses to speak to the rock: "Before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts." Moses does not obey the Divine order exactly: "And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank."

Both stories have religious aspects other than what we may now call God's 'resources policy'. The first one tells us that the instrument for the punishment - in this instance, the rod - may occasionally be the same as that used for assistance, to indicate that it has no intrinsic value.

The second underlines the centrality of obedience to God. Because Moses does not follow God's instructions to the letter, he is punished: he is told that he will not lead the People of Israel into the Promised Land. One understands from the story that, while Moses' rod is not essential for the modification of nature, God's will is.

Isaiah tells us that in the future also, God will respond to the demand of the poor Israelites and make ample resources available where they usually are not: "I will open up streams on the bare hills and fountains amid the valleys; I will turn the desert into ponds, the arid land into springs of water."
The motif returns a few chapters later: “The wild beasts shall honor Me, jackals and ostriches, for I provide water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to My chosen people.”

b) Incurring God’s wrath

The Israelites’ perception that there are insufficient God-given resources in the desert raises God’s wrath: “The riffraff in their midst felt a glutinous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!’ ” From a modern environmental point of view, this can be summarized as desire for conspicuous consumption (for foods from abroad.)

After these complaints, God provides the Israelites with quail from the sea: “The meat was still between their teeth, nor yet chewed, when the anger of the Lord blazed forth against the people and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague. That place was named Kibroth-hataavah, because the people who had the craving were buried there.” The name of the location, Kibroth-hataavah, translates literally into ‘the graves of craving’.

We can also summarize the above by saying that, here, the Israelites are being taught that the environment is an integral part of the all-encompassing religious viewpoint. God provides humanity with its elementary needs. Man is not expected to consume conspicuously. God provides the manna in such a way that its residues do not pollute the soil. There is enough manna for everybody. However, it cannot be stored. Thus man remains dependent on God’s supply of new food each day.

c) The scarcity of resources

What we now would call policies and problems pertinent to natural resources are referred to a number of times. Water is a scarce resource and thus becomes a bone of contention: this happens more than once for both Abraham and Isaac. Abraham complains to Abimelech, king of Gerar: “Then Abraham reproached Abimelech for the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized. But Abimelech said, ‘I do not know who did this; you did not tell me, nor have I heard of it until today.’ ” Abraham then digs a new well; he gives seven ewes to the king and says: “You are to accept these seven ewes from me as proof that I dug this well.”

Earlier in Genesis, it is told that Abraham and Lot had so many flocks, herds and tents “that the land could not support them
staying together; for their possessions were so great that they could not remain together.” Abraham then proposes that they should not compete for the resources and quarrel; rather they should go their separate ways, as apparently there are grazing resources available elsewhere. “Is not the whole land before you?” Let us separate: if you go north, I will go south; and if you go south, I will go north.”

Lot then chooses a place which is attractive in both its natural environment and its resources: the well-watered plain of the Jordan. He pitches his tents there, near Sodom, a town whose inhabitants are wicked sinners. This environment will later prove calamitous.

Plain religious reading of this text indicates that it can be disastrous to focus solely on material interests without taking spiritual ones into account.

Scarcity of water also leads to problems in the days of Isaac: “But when Isaac’s servants, digging in the wadi, found there a well of spring water, the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen, saying, ‘The water is ours.’ He named that well Esek, because they contended with him. And when they dug another well, they disputed over that one also.”

d) Wise management of resources

The message that humanity should carefully manage its resources is implicit in the story of Joseph. He advises the Pharaoh to hoard the surplus grain produced in the seven good years, so that there will be sufficient food in the meager years.

This story has both economic and environmental aspects. Thanks to Divine inspiration, Joseph has understood the meaning of Pharaoh’s dream. Abundant resources will become scarce. Nature’s resources should not be wasted, but properly managed in order to keep people alive in periods of difficulty.

The seven fat-fleshed cows who are eaten by the seven lean-fleshed cows, and the seven thin ears who swallow the seven healthy ears, illustrate natural cycles. Egypt had a long tradition of rationing Nile water on which the country’s well-being depended. One can only speculate that Joseph used this as a model for his grain purchasing and hoarding policy.

There is no doubt, however, that man can use natural resources for his benefit. This can be seen from the Bible text which says that, when the Israelites come into their land, this is “a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper.”

Trees can be cut down to serve economic purposes, which is not seen as wanton destruction. Joseph’s descendants complain to Joshua
that they have not been given enough land for their numbers. Joshua replies: "Go up to the forest country and clear an area for yourselves there, in the territory of the Perizzites and the Rephaim, seeing that you are cramped in the hill country of Ephraim". Apparently, this uninhabited land is easy to conquer. The same motif returns shortly thereafter: "The hill country shall be yours as well; true, it is forest land, but you will clear it and possess it to its farthest limits."  

Cycling

What we now would call biogeochemical cycling and recycling is another environmentally-related motif that may be found in the Bible. This is first mentioned when God tells Adam: "By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground - for from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return."  

In Ezekiel's prophecy, an innovative form of recycling is announced, when God tells the prophet: "Prophesy over these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! Thus said the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again. I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with flesh, and form skin over you. And I will put breath into you, and you shall live again. And you shall know that I am the Lord!"  

When Moses fails to come down from Mount Sinai, the Israelites ask Aaron to make them a god. "Aaron said to them: 'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a golden calf."  

Donations are made again on the occasion of the building of the Tabernacle: "Man and women, all whose hearts moved them, all who would make an elevation offering of gold to the Lord, came bringing brooches, earrings, rings, and pendants - gold objects of all kinds." It is understood that jewelry and gold are recycled as they have no use as such in the Tabernacle, and we are told about the many ritual objects of gold which obviously must have been made from these.  

However, the Bible seems to indicate that, at certain times, not only recycling but also destruction is part of the normal course of things: "A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven: a time for being born and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted."
In his assignment as a prophet Jeremiah is given four destructive tasks and two constructive ones: “See, I appoint you this day over nations and kingdoms: to uproot and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

d) War policies in Biblical times

Destruction and pollution occur on several occasions, in connection with war. Several Israelite Biblical leaders, both the God-fearing and the wicked, carry out destructive policies. In one incident in the Bible, the kings of Israel, Judah and Edom apply a ‘scorched earth’ policy (including the felling of trees) in their war against the Moabites. The prophet Elisha orders the three kings: “You shall conquer every fortified town and every splendid city; you shall fell every good tree and stop up all wells of water; and every fertile field you shall ruin with stones.” In line with classical Bible commentators, Feliks notes that this action referred to an enemy outside the land of Israel. This might explain the contradiction between the prophet’s command and the commandment of bal tashhit as expressed in the Bible.

Another mode of causing environmental damage in Biblical wars would now be called intentional pollution. When the cruel Abimelech captures the town of Shechem, he not only razes it but sows it with salt. In another case of destruction of natural resources, when King Sennacherib of Assyria invades Judea and marches on Jerusalem, the religiously faithful King Hezekiah stops up all the springs outside the city in order to stop water supplies to the enemy.

The position of animals

The Bible provides many perspectives on animals and their position in society. The various motifs can be summarized as follows:

a) Animal sacrifice as a substitute for human sacrifice
b) Animals as a tool of Divine punishment
c) Animals cannot wantonly be destroyed
d) Animals should be treated well
e) Animals are held responsible for their deeds
f) Animals are also used in metaphors

a) Isaac’s sacrifice

Animal sacrifices appear early in the Torah as the private initiatives of both Abel and Noah. In Abraham’s time, man is given Divine instruction to offer sacrifices to God. Initially it seems that the commandment given to Abraham involves the sacrifice of a human being,
his own son; however, the story concludes with the sacrifice of an
animal instead.\textsuperscript{131}

The facts in this story that are relevant to the man-animal relationship
can be summarized very briefly. A man, Abraham, saddles his ass and
takes his son, Isaac, two servants and some wood up to Mount Moria,
in order to sacrifice the boy. The child is already tied up on top of the
woodpile and Abraham is raising the knife for slaughter, when he sees
a ram “caught in the thicket by its horns” and sacrifices that instead.

According to the Bible, Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac be­
cause God has told him to; afterwards, he sacrifices the ram instead
of his son because this is what God’s angel instructs him to do. The
message is theocentric: pious man must do whatever God commands
him, even if it seems unreasonable from a human perspective.

Abraham is rewarded for his obedience to God by becoming the
father of a nation, and is told that the rest of world will also benefit:
“All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descen­
dants, because you have obeyed My command”.\textsuperscript{132}

This story, too, has aspects of environmental relevance within its
framework of religious ideas. God tells humanity that humans should
not be sacrificed, but animals can be. This seems to indicate a hierar­
chy within the ranks of Creation. (This is in line with the concepts
discussed in Chapter Three.)

From a different angle, looking at their respective distance from
God, the difference between man and animal seems negligible. This
is succinctly expressed in Ecclesiastes: “For in respect of the fate of
man and the fate of beast, they have one and the same fate: as the
one dies so dies the other, and both have the same lifebreath; man
has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing. Both
go to the same place; both came from dust and both return to dust.
Who knows if a man’s lifebreath does rise upward and if a beast’s
breath does sink down into the earth?” \textsuperscript{133}

Abraham’s words reflect a similar idea with regard to man and the
inanimate, when he attempts to reduce the number of righteous
people needed to save Sodom. He addresses God, saying: “Here I
venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.” \textsuperscript{134} Job
comes to a similar conclusion after his sufferings: “He regarded me
as clay, I have become like dust and ashes.” \textsuperscript{135} and “Therefore, I
recant and relent, being but dust and ashes.” \textsuperscript{136}

**Sacrifices substituted by prayers**

Biblical (and Mishnaiic) texts referring to sacrifices have been given
a substantial place in Jewish prayer. The story of Abraham’s sacrifice
of Isaac is included in the morning prayer.
Biblical texts at the beginning of the morning prayer deal with the daily sacrifices which were offered while the Temple stood. After the destruction of the Temple, prayers took the place of these sacrifices. The concept behind this is found in the prophets: “Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him: ‘Forgive all guilt and accept what is good; instead of bulls we will pay [the offering of] our lips.’”

b) Animals as a tool of Divine punishment or salvation

Animals are frequently used as a tool of Divine punishment or salvation of men. The first is seen multi-fold in the story of the Ten Plagues. There is also a Biblical prophecy which predicts that an insect will be useful in the conquest of the Land of Israel: “I will send hornets ahead of you, and it shall drive out before you the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites.”

The prophet Elijah conveys to King Ahab God’s message that nature will punish him and his people, and then flees for his life to the other side of the Jordan: “As the Lord lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding.” God tells the prophet: “You will drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” Elijah does as he is told, and “the ravens brought him bread and meat every morning and every evening, and he drank from the wadi.”

But animals may also have an informative role, telling man about God. Job expresses this in a metaphor: “But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the sky, they will tell you, or speak to the earth, it will teach you; the fish of the sea, they will inform you.”

c) No wanton destruction of animals

The Torah opposes wanton destruction of animals. In Jacob’s testament he speaks negatively about Simeon and Levi, who do not obey the law – most probably referring to their action against the inhabitants of Shechem, who had defiled their sister, Dinah. The patriarch mentions murder and the killing of animals in one breath: “For when angry they slay men, and when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce, and their wrath so relentless.”

d) Proper treatment of animals

In the previous chapter we have already mentioned how several Halakhot assure the proper treatment of animals. Several Bible stories stress the relevance of this to human society. From the ass’s speech to Balaam we understand that the considerate treatment of an animal serving its master is right according to the Torah: “The angel of the
Lord said to him, ‘Why have you beaten your ass these three times? It is I who came out as an adversary, for the errand is obnoxious to me. And when the ass saw me, she shied away because of me those three times. If she had not shied away from me, you are the one I should have killed, while sparing her.’ ”

The manner in which animals are treated is also considered a reflection of personality. This is illustrated in the story of Eliezer, Abraham's senior servant, and his choice of Rebecca for Isaac's wife. He arrives in the city of Aram-naharaim, and asks God for a sign that he is making the right decision: “Let the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please, lower your jar that I may drink’, and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’ — let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac.” Apparently, only a woman who treats animals well is worthy of the son of his master Abraham.

e) Animals are responsible for their deeds

Animals can sin and be held responsible for their deeds. This is true both for the snake in the Paradise story and the animals destroyed in the Flood. In the first story, the snake has tempted the woman to eat the forbidden fruit: “Then the Lord God said to the serpent, ‘Because you did this, more cursed shall you be than all cattle and all the wild beasts: on your belly shall you crawl and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their heel.’ ”

Similarly, in the story of the Flood: “The Lord said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created – men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them.’ ” The reason for this is given a few verses later: “When God saw how corrupt the earth was, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth, God said to Noah, ‘I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth.’ ” Thus the phrase ‘all flesh’ appears to include animals, who were also corrupt. (For other exegeses, see later in this chapter.)

In what is probably a metaphor, Ezekiel reproaches animals that they behave badly: “Is it not enough for you to graze on choice grazing ground, but you must also trample with your feet what is left from your grazing? And is it not enough for you to drink clear water, but you must also muddy with your feet what is left? And must My flock graze on what your feet have trampled and drink what your feet have muddied?”
The story of Jonah also seems to indicate that animal responsibility does exist: “And he had the word cried through Nineveh: ‘By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast – of flock or herd – shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! They shall be covered with sackcloth – man and beast – and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty.’”

Later in the story, after the story of the ricinus plant, it is indicated that Divine mercy extends to animals “Then the Lord said: ‘You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!”

f) Animals in metaphors

Animals are sometimes used in metaphors; their most essential characteristics are often described in terms of human personality.

A series of – partly obscure – references to animals is given in Jacob’s deathbed forecast of what will befall his sons in the future. Judah is compared favorably to the lion, the king of beasts; but then reference is also made to an ass. Issachar is rather scathingly compared to a “strong-boned ass, crouching among the sheepfolds. When he saw how good was security, and how pleasant was the country, he bent his shoulder to the burden, and became a toiling serf.” However, the wild ass, with whom Joseph is compared, is viewed quite positively. Jacob predicts that he will be firm against his attackers and will be abundantly blessed.

The comparison of Dan to a snake, the animal viewed so negatively in the Paradise story, remains cryptic: “Dan shall be a serpent by the road, a viper by the path, that bites the horse’ heels so that his rider is thrown backward.”

Other sons who compared to animals are Naphtali (“a hind let loose, which yields lovely fawns” and Benjamin (“a ravenous wolf; in the morning he consumes the foe, and in the evening he divides the spoil”).

Pollution

Pollution – with its religious connotations – is referred to on several occasions. Sometimes it overlaps with the concept pollution as we understand it today, on other occasions it does not, as will be seen below.

In one of Ezekiel’s visions, clean water coming from the Temple and gushing from the south wall will purify polluted water: “This
water,' he told me, 'runs out to the eastern region, and flows into the Aravah; and when it comes into the sea, into the sea of foul waters, the water will become wholesome. Every living creature that swarms will be able to live wherever this stream goes; the fish will be very abundant once these waters have reached there. It will be wholesome, and everything will live wherever this stream goes. Fishermen shall stand beside it all the way from Ein-Gedi to Ein-Elgaim; it shall be a place for drying nets; and the fish will be of various kinds [and] most plentiful, like the fish of the Great Sea. But its swamps and marshes shall not become wholesome; they will serve to [supply] salt. All kinds of trees for food will grow up on both banks of the stream. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail; they will yield new fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the Temple. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.' }

The story of the destruction of the golden calf shows how one may rid oneself of 'spiritual pollution' in a stream. This is best expressed in the Hertz translation of the Bible: "And I took your sin, the calf which ye had made, and burnt it with fire, and beat it in pieces, grinding it very small, until it was as fine as dust; and I cast the dust thereof into the brook that descended out of the mount." (In the modern environmental sense, there is no pollution, as gold is inert matter.)

Similarly, King Josiah tears down his predecessors' altars of idol­atry: "He removed them quickly from there and scattered their rubble in the Kidron Valley." As contemporary Jerusalemites know, this valley turns into a brook in rainy seasons.

In a poetic form, this motif returns in one of Micah's prophecies: "He will takes us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea."

The relationship between human wickedness and pollution (as well as destruction) is a familiar Biblical motif. (This idea was developed in rabbinical literature, and is analyzed in some detail in Chapter Five.) In the story of Paradise, the embodiment of perfection and harmony, there is no mention of decay. The story of Noah and the Flood is the paradigm of sin's leading to natural disaster. God tells Abraham that, had there been ten just people in the city of wickedness, Sodom, He would have been willing to save it from destruction. Another Divine measure for punishing the Egyptians, the sixth plague consists of air pollution from furnace soot: it causes boils.

Spiritual pollution is transferable as if it were tangible. This is most powerfully expressed when the community's sin and guilt are removed by symbolically transferring them to a goat. The animal is
then expelled from society by sending it to Azazel, a place whence it cannot return to the camp.\textsuperscript{167}

The narrative on King Yehu links idolatry to human excrement. He orders his guards and officers to destroy the pillar of Baal: “And they tore down the temple of Baal and turned it into latrines, as is still the case.” \textsuperscript{168}

In his first vision, the prophet Isaiah speaks of how Jerusalem has become a sinful city in which “silver has turned into dross”.\textsuperscript{169} However, when he foresees that God will turn the city again into a faithful one, where “rebels and sinners shall all be crushed”,\textsuperscript{170} he uses a metaphor from the world of waste management, and adds that God will “smelt out your dross as with lye, and remove all your slag”.\textsuperscript{171, 172}

Another text from Isaiah can be interpreted as referring to punishment for either physical or moral pollution, or both: “The earth is withered, sear; ... For the earth was defiled under its inhabitants; because they transgressed teachings, violated laws, broke the ancient covenant. That is why a curse consumes the earth, and its inhabitants pay the penalty; That is why earth's dwellers have dwindled, and but few men are left.” \textsuperscript{173}

Another pollution-related motif is given in the Book of Kings. “The men of the town said to Elisha, ‘Look, the town is a pleasant place to live in, as my lord can see; but the water is bad and the land causes bereavement.’ He responded, ‘Bring me a new dish and put salt in it.’ They brought it to him; he went to the spring and threw salt into it. And he said, ‘Thus said the Lord: “I heal this water; no longer shall death and bereavement come from it!” ’.” \textsuperscript{174} In a modern environmental sense, putting salt in water would be considered pollution. This illustrates once again that the contemporary notion of pollution does not necessarily coincide with the Biblical one.

\section*{II. Commentators}

Having thus discussed several of the Bible’s stories, I will now devote attention to some aspects of modern environmental interpretation of the Bible both in contemporary Jewish publications and by Jewish Bible commentators.

\textit{Modern publications}

Modern Jewish writers seldom analyze systematically the non-halakhic sections of the Bible for their ecological meaning. If they do refer to these passages it is usually incidental, or in a passing remark on the narrative. So Arthur Waskow reads that “the mistake of Eden, which is the act of eating wrongly that which comes from
the earth, results in a history of winning food from the earth only from toil and sweat, as the earth sprouts thorns and thistles.”

David S. Shapiro offers the following interpretation of the passage “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth.” The earth is not only the seat of man’s activities and that of other creatures; it is not only the medium of their sustenance. It is the very source of man’s existence as well as that of the other land-animals. The earth is the mother of man, from which he emerged and to which he will ultimately return.

Jeff Sultar answers the question of whether man is part of or distinct from nature with the following exegesis: “That humans and soil are of one substance is expressed by the Hebrew words for each: adam for ‘human’, adamah for ‘ground’. Into this ground, God blew the breath of life and created a living being. Humans were still soil, but suddenly much more – both of and beyond the soil. To provide companionship for Adam, God molded animals. While humans and animals are linked – both are conceived in adamah – no animal was a suitable partner for Adam, for though he was part of the rest of Creation, he was also distinct from it.”

Jeremy Cohen is one of the few exceptions among modern Jewish writers: his book on Genesis 1:28, systematically covers an environmentally relevant Bible text with both legal and narrative aspects.

Another exception is Robert Gordis’s ecological interpretation of the “Speeches of the Lord out of the Whirlwind” in the Book of Job. For Gordis, this text express God’s creative will, made “without any reference to man’s desires or needs, or even his existence.” It is not the detailed description of nature’s elements which is relevant, but rather what can be learned from God’s pride in it. This is true for inanimate nature as well as for the seven animals later described in the passage. He points out that, according to the text, these have been created to fulfill God’s purpose for reasons only known to Him. Man may enjoy them but they were not created specifically for his benefit. Gordis infers from the text that this Biblical book expresses a religio-ethical basis for ecology. All God’s creatures have a right to the earth and as such, man should not abuse them.

Gordis seems to be well aware that his interpretation is not explicitly stated in the text. He therefore hedges when drawing his conclusions which, from a literal reading, seem to be more Gordis than Job. “If our understanding of the meaning of the Speeches of the Lord is valid, the Book of Job offers a religious foundation for the inherent rights of animals as co-inhabitants of the earth, adumbrated two millennia earlier than the emergence of secular ethics. By insisting on a God-centered world, to which man’s title is conditional,
the Book of Job presents a basis in religion for opposing and ultimately eliminating the needless destruction of life and the pollution of the natural resources in the world.” 182

**Jewish Bible commentators**

Another source for a better understanding of Judaism’s attitude toward the environment are the Jewish Bible commentators and, most particularly, the classical ones. While we have to derive the general picture from the Bible texts themselves, as set out above, several secular environmentalist concepts – which have become explicitly expressed in our time – are already present in the texts of these religious commentators from earlier centuries.

As specific examples of this approach, the main focus here will be on Jewish commentators on three of the Biblical stories with environmental aspects, the last two of were already mentioned above: Creation, the Flood and the Ten Plagues.

Reference will often be made to Rashi. He largely focuses on the plain (literal) meaning of the text (*peshat*). Furthermore, his commentary has predominated in Jewish tradition, not only compared to those of other commentators but often also in comparison to the rabbinic sources which he quotes.

**Creation**

In the classical Jewish commentaries on the Creation story, we often find sides of the debate as to the purpose of the creation of the earth and nature. With regard to the opening verse of the Bible, “When God began to create heaven and earth – the earth being unformed and void”, 183 Me’am Lo’eiz states that the Torah is the foundation of the world. 184 Everything in heaven and earth was created for the Torah, which is the real meaning of this beginning. (He adds that the only reason that the Jews have been created is to keep the Torah. Thus, before they study the Torah, they must first recite a blessing before God.)

For Hirsch, this first verse evokes the comment of a Divine order which should not be perturbed. Not only is the world in general and its order a world of God’s, but also each individual being. Woe to those who destroy His world; hail to those who maintain it. 185

“God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water.’ ” 186 On this passage, the 16th century commentator Moses Alshech 187 comments that the physical world relates to the spiritual world, and abstract matter is compressed in such a way that it becomes compatible with physical matter. The earth had to be fluid initially, in order to be able to receive the
spiritual outpourings from the abstract Heaven. Only spiritual force prevents the natural disintegration of the material.

Referring to Genesis 1:10, "God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of waters He called Seas. And God saw that this was good", Nachmanides develops his concept of the God-man-nature relationship. All elements were created for the earth to be a habitation for man as, among the lower creatures, only man recognizes the Creator. Nachmanides expresses the view that the whole purpose of nature's creation is for man to acknowledge God.

The 16th century commentator Sforno relates this Bible text to one from Isaiah: "For thus saith the Lord, The Creator of heaven who alone is God, Who formed the earth and made it, Who alone established it - He did not create it a waste, but formed it for habitation: 'I am the Lord, and there is none else'." The reason why God gathered the waters and brought the dry land forward, was to realize His intention of creating good for the world and those who live in it.

Hirsch interprets the end of the verse to mean that, not only did God create the world, but He re-evaluated it and found the natural order in accordance with His purposes.

Basing his ideas principally on rabbinic sources, Rashi comments on the text "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth": he states that the dust from which man was created was brought together from all over the earth, so that the earth everywhere would later accept him for burial. This Midrash seems to indicate the strong link between animated man and the inanimate earth.

Detailed reference to the commentaries on Genesis 1:28 is made in Chapter Two.

A pollution motif emerges in Rashi’s commentary on the following text: "You shall be more cursed than the ground which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand." Modern environmentalism would not consider the earth's absorption of a murdered person's blood as physical pollution, because it is organic material. Rashi considered it pollution in a religious sense. He says that the earth will be cursed once again, due to its willingness to absorb the blood of Abel whom Cain has murdered. (The earth had already been cursed earlier: "Cursed be the ground because of you; by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life." Here again there is divergence between the modern environmentalist's concept of pollution and the traditional viewpoint of Judaism.

The Flood

"The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness." In reference to this verse from Genesis, the Zohar
quotes R. Chiyya: he says that when men are righteous and observe God’s laws, the earth becomes stronger. The reason for this is that the Divine majesty rests upon the earth, causing gladness both above and below. A similar, but secular, view is behind the environmentalist approach, saying that if we treat nature well, it will not deteriorate.

The following verse in the story of the Flood is difficult to explain: “When God saw how corrupt the earth was, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth.” The obvious difficulty in the text is, what does ‘all flesh’ mean? We can understand that man was wicked, but why were the animals corrupt? Rashi is concise: “ ‘All flesh’ – even cattle, wild animals and birds – were (sexually) in need of – other kinds.”

This commentary is based on a much older Jewish tradition. It refers to a passage from the Talmud where the same Bible text is explained: “R. Yochanan said: ‘This teaches us that man paired cattle with wild animals, and wild animals and cattle, and all of these with man, and man with all of these.’ R. Abba Bar-Kahana said: ‘All [animals] have later abandoned these [practices] except for the tusalmi.’ ”

These ideas express the same concern for chastity and constancy of species which is found in Halakha.

Rashi’s Talmud-based explanation is by no means the only one. Nachmanides mentions this passage, but considers the scripture simply to say that ‘all flesh’ means ‘all people’.

Rashi also gives an environmentally relevant explanation for the next verse: “God said to Noah, ‘I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth.’ ” He comments on the phrase ‘an end to all flesh’: “Everywhere one finds lewdness, a pestilence comes over the world, and kills both the good and the bad.”

Today we might translate this into a secular environmentalist version: the environmental transgressions of some people will cause havoc to the world in general (for example, burning the rain forests will cause global warming). This is another example of the traditional Jewish motif of sin leading to disease (a subject dealt with in Chapter Five.)

“But I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark, with your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives.” Basing the reasoning for his interpretation on the way the sentence is structured, i.e. as it seemingly separates the males from the females and doesn’t say ‘you and your wife, your sons and their wives’, Rashi reiterates the rabbinic idea that intercourse was forbidden in the Ark.

Me’am Lo’ez extends this comment by saying that sexual relations are forbidden in times of tragedy. This is a further indication of the
view that ‘be fertile and multiply’ is not an absolute command for all situations.

Animals in the ark

Several other environmental motifs appear in the commentaries. So, Noah sends out the raven from the ark, who goes and returns until the water has dried up from the earth. Rashi adds a quotation referring to the future usefulness of the raven when, in the days of Elijah, he brings the prophet bread and meat. This explains further the meaning of maintaining biodiversity: each seemingly useless animal has a function in God’s creation, a recurrent motif in the Midrash.

Furthermore, there is some indication in the commentaries that Judaism views animals in the wild more positively than those in captivity. Rashi comments on this with regard to the verse: “The dove came back to him toward evening, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the waters had decreased on the earth. He waited still another seven days and sent the dove forth; and it did not return to him any more.”

According to Rashi, the olive leaf is apparently very bitter. Basing his comment on the Midrash, he interprets the dove’s words to mean: “Let my food be bitter as an olive from the hands of God, and not sweet as honey from the hands of humans.”

With regard to the relationship between religion and environment, another relevant comment refers to the sacrifices which Noah offers to God after he leaves the ark: “Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking of every clean animal and of every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar.” Here Rashi quotes Noah, who says that the only reason why God tells him to take seven pairs of these animals into the ark is in order to be able to make a sacrifice of them.

Once again, this is an expression of theocentricity: the ‘extra’ animals are not saved because they are ritually clean, and will later be specifically allowed to be eaten by the Israelites; their inclusion in the ark is interpreted as an availability for sacrifice, which the unclean animals are unfit for. It is for this reason that only one pair of the latter is taken into the ark.

Eating meat

After the Flood, man is allowed to eat meat for the first time: “Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these.”

Me’am Lo’ez believes that this verse reflects a radical change in the relationship between man and animal. He explains that, after Adam’s sin, the animals are no longer willing to accept man’s author-
ity. He claims that man can no longer plow because the ox refuses to obey the farmer’s instructions. In Noah’s time, man regains his authority over animals, who now fear him (partly because he is now allowed to slaughter and eat them): “The fear and dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky – everything with which the earth is astir – and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand.”

Me’am Lo’ez also claims that the reason why Noah is permitted to eat flesh, whereas Adam is not, is that before the Flood, the animals have not derived any advantage from man. However, as it is due to Noah that humanity and animals survive in the ark, he has now acquired rights over the animals and thus is allowed to kill and eat them.

The Ten Plagues

Commentators on the story of the Ten Plagues also make a number of observations of relevance to the present subject. One verse which these comments refer to is: “The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘When Pharaoh speaks to you and says, “Produce your marvel”, you shall say to Aaron, “Take your rod and cast it down before Pharaoh.” It shall turn into a serpent.’”

Here, the Zohar quotes R. Eleazar, who refers to a double modification of nature. He says that God performs two miracles with Aaron’s rod, a piece of dry wood: for a brief time, it is converted into a living being, and it swallows the serpents of the Egyptians.

The second plague befalling the Egyptians consists of frogs. The Midrash here quotes R. Acha, son of R. Hanina, who explains that each part of God’s creation fulfills a role. He refers to those prophets who initially refuse to obey God’s order to prophesy, and says that He can use serpents, scorpions or frogs in their stead. He also refers to the Bible text mentioned above, where God announces the use of hornets.

In order to be exempt from the last plague – the slaying of the first-born – the Israelites are told to put lamb’s blood on the door-posts and lintels of their houses: “For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and I will mete out punishment to all the gods of Egypt, I the Lord. And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.”

Alschech sees in this a variation on the idea of animal sacrifice, where the blood of the animal replaces the human blood. God accepts the animal sacrifice as a substitute for the taking of human life. In the specific case of the tenth plague, the blood on the door-
posts should be considered an act of atonement for the Jews’ having participated in the worship of lamb idols.\(^\text{221}\)

The lowly hyssop

Plants also fulfill functions in God’s design of the world. Even a plant as humble as the hyssop is given an important task. Before the tenth plague Moses tells the elders: “Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts.” \(^\text{222}\) As mentioned, these houses will be passed over when the firstborn in the land of Egypt are killed.

The Midrash says that, in the eyes of man, the hyssop seems to be a lowly plant of no worth. This is also expressed in a text in which it seems to be considered the extreme opposite of the mighty cedar. So it is written about King Solomon: “He discoursed about trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall.” \(^\text{223}\)

The Midrash explains that God redeems Israel through the lowly hyssop.\(^\text{224}\) It also fulfills a role on several other occasions, such as in the purification of the leper\(^\text{225}\) and the burning of the red heifer.\(^\text{226}\) The message is that God performs miracles even with things that seem to be of little or no importance.

Conclusions

Many insights can be gained from reading the Bible from the viewpoint of the modern environmental discipline. The above analysis deals with only a very partial view of the Biblical narrative’s potential contribution to the development of a Jewish attitude toward the environment. The one issue on which a broad perspective emerges here is nature’s role in God’s creation. As the Bible is so permeated with this view, which appears in so many different places, this broadens the picture already obtained from Halakha.

Furthermore, it reveals the Bible’s attitude toward animals and other parts of the ecosystem, a subject which can be considerably enlarged by further research. From the examples given of Jewish interpretative commentary on the Bible verses, possible origins of several present-day environmental motifs can be discovered. Apart from a few passing remarks on other issues, I have mainly referred to three major environmental stories in the Bible. (Paradise, the Flood and the Ten Plagues.) It is reasonable to assume that other narratives of environmental relevance will yield further such motifs.

Several morally desirable attitudes toward nature on the part of general humanity may be inferred from the Bible’s non-halakhic texts.
It is possible to conclude from these the often-expressed concept of responsible stewardship on behalf of God, but not overwhelmingly obvious. Non-halakhic Bible texts are much more open to interpretation than the Noachide commandments.\textsuperscript{227}

Again, the above vision is strategic and not exhaustive. I have focused on key concepts which have assisted me in reaching my goal: to identify those elements of Biblical and post-Biblical tradition that are relevant to developing a comprehensive Jewish attitude toward environmental issues. The various methods outlined indicate that there is substantial potential for further research on the Bible's narrative texts. The same may be said for the prophetic and wisdom texts.

Notes for Chapter Four

1 Other methods of traditional Biblical exegesis are: \textit{remez} (veiled allusions), \textit{derash} (homiletic interpretation) and \textit{sod} (mystical interpretation.)

2 Genesis Chapters 2 & 3.

3 Isaiah 11:6.

4 According to Shalom Rosenberg, this passage depicts the Bible's conceptual revolution in the relationship between God and nature. God is outside nature, and creates a new morality which breaks man's enslavement to nature. Nature means the victory of the strongest. The Bible recognizes this reality but also stresses that things can be different, hence the vision of the Latter days in which wolf and lamb will graze together. Torah veTeva. Paper presented at the Harvard Conference on Judaism and the Natural World, February 22-24, 1998. Hebrew.

5 Isaiah 65:25.


7 Genesis 2:16-17.

8 Genesis 1:31.


10 Ecclesiastes 11:5.

11 This book is particularly rich in references to Nature. Yehuda Feliks writes: "The Book of Psalms is replete with wonderful poems of nature, containing hundreds of parables, similes and metaphors drawn from animal and plant life as well as from agriculture." Feliks, op. cit., p. x.


14 Psalm 147:7-9.

15 Psalm 147:16-18.

16 Psalm 148:4-5.


19 Psalm 93:3.

20 Psalm 29:5-9.
21 Psalm 19:2.
22 Psalm 136:3-9.
23 Psalm 104:19-20, 32.
24 Genesis 9:8-17.
26 Numbers 17:20.
28 It is interesting to note that the two sole animals in the Bible to be given the gift of speech are impure ones: the serpent in Genesis, chapter 3, and the donkey in this story. While we are told that the donkey's speech is only a temporary phenomenon, we do not know whether the serpent's facility is permanent.
30 II Kings 5:14.
32 Deuteronomy 11:16-17.
34 Joel 2:24-6.
35 Hosea 2:20.
36 Genesis, Chapters 18 & 19.
39 Jeremiah 15:3.
40 I Kings 14:11.
41 I Kings 16:4.
43 Exodus, Chapters 7-12.
44 Exodus 7:21.
45 Exodus 9:10-11.
46 Exodus 7:8-10.
47 Exodus 8:12-13.
48 Exodus 7:28.
49 Exodus 8:9-10.
50 Exodus 8:13-14.
51 Exodus 9:10.
52 Exodus 9:25.
53 Exodus 9:3.
54 Exodus 10:22-23.
55 Exodus 10:15.
56 Exodus 14:21-22.
57 Exodus 14:27.
58 Numbers 16:30.
59 Numbers 16:31-33.
61 Genesis, Chapters 6, 7, & 8.
62 Genesis 8:21-22.
63 This promise still leaves the earth vulnerable to destruction: it is not a Divine promise to save the earth from an asteroid, for example.
64 Genesis 9:15.
65 Isaiah 54:9–10.
67 Genesis 9:11.
68 Joshua 10:12.
70 Joshua 6:20.
71 I Kings 18:21.
72 I Kings 18:38.
73 I Kings 18:45.
74 Jonah 1:4.
75 Jonah 2:1.
76 Jonah, Chapters 1–4.
77 Jonah 4:6–8.
78 Ezekiel 21:3.
79 Ezekiel 21:8–9.
80 Ezekiel 31:3.
81 Ezekiel 31:12.
82 Jeremiah 17:7–8.
83 Psalms 1:1, 3–4.
84 Jeremiah 2:2: “Go proclaim to Jerusalem: Thus said the Lord: I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride – how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.”
85 Hosea 9:10: “I found Israel [as pleasing] as grapes in the wilderness: your fathers seemed to Me like the first fig to ripen on a fig tree. But when they came to Baalpeor, they turned aside to shamefulness; then they became as detested as they had been loved.”
86 Amos 5:25: “Did you offer sacrifice and oblation to Me those forty years in the wilderness, O House of Israel?”
87 Ezekiel 36:33–35: “Thus said the Lord God: ‘When I have cleansed you of all your iniquities, I will people your settlements, and the ruined places shall be rebuilt; and the desolate land, after lying waste in the sight of every passerby, shall again be tilled. And men shall say, ‘That land, once desolate, has become like the Garden of Eden; and the cities, once ruined, desolate, and ravaged, are now populated and fortified.’”
89 Deuteronomy 12:2–3.
90 II Kings 23:5.
91 I Kings 14:23.
92 II Kings 16:4.
93 II Kings 17:6–10.
94 Isaiah 57:4–5.
95 Ezekiel 6:13.
96 Exodus 16:14.
97 Exodus 16:21.
99 Exodus 17:5–6.
100 Numbers 20:8.
101 Numbers 20:11.
102 Isaiah 41:18.
103 Isaiah 43:20.
104 Numbers 11:4–6.
105 Numbers 11:25–34.
107 Genesis 21:30.
111 See Genesis, Chapters 18 & 19.
112 Genesis 26:19–21.
113 Genesis, Chapter 41.
114 From an economic viewpoint, this shows an understanding of the price theory, based on supply and demand. When the grain is abundant, prices are low; when it becomes scarce, prices sky-rocket. This enables the Pharaoh to become even wealthier than before. The political might of Egypt increases as neighboring countries become dependent on Egyptian grain supplies.
115 On some occasions in the Bible the limited resources of an individual are extended through a miracle, as in the story of the prophet Elijah and the widow who provides him with food. I Kings 17:7–16. A similar story about the prophet Elisha, is told in II Kings 4:1–7.
116 Deuteronomy 8:9.
117 Joshua 17:15.
118 Joshua 17:18.
119 Genesis 3:19.
120 Ezekiel, 37:4–6.
121 Exodus 32:2–4.
122 Exodus 35:22.
123 Exodus, Chapters 36–39.
124 Ecclesiastes 3:1–2.
125 Jeremiah 1:10.
126 We also know that Israel's enemies carried out destructive activities: “After the Israelites had done their sowing, Midian, Amalek, and the Kedemites would come up and raid them; they would attack them, destroy the produce of the land all the way to Gaza, and leave no means of sustenance in Israel, not a sheep or an ox or an ass.” Judges 6:3–4.
127 II Kings 3:19ff. According to tradition, prophets are empowered to command an ad hoc violation of a Biblical commandment.
129 Judges 9:43.
130 II Chronicles 32:2–4.
131 Genesis, Chapter 22.
133 Ecclesiastes 3:19–21.
134 Genesis 18:27.
135 Job 30:19.
137 Numbers 28:1–8 and Leviticus 1:11. (Similarly, the text referring to the Shabbat offering is added on Shabbat – Numbers 28:9–10; the Bible verses referring to the New Moon offering are added on the appropriate day - Numbers 28:11–15.)
138 Hosea 14:3.
139 Exodus 23:28. The JPS translation notes that the Hebrew text is unclear, and that the word can mean either 'plague' or 'hornets'.

140 I Kings 17:1.
141 I Kings 17:4.
142 I King 17:6.
143 Job 12:7-8.
144 Genesis, Chapter 34.
146 Numbers 23:32-33.
147 Genesis 24:12-14.
149 Genesis 6:7.
151 Ezekiel 34:18-19.
152 Jonah 3:7-9.
153 Jonah 4:10-11.
154 Genesis Chapter 49.
155 Genesis 49:8-12.
158 Genesis 49:17.
159 Genesis 49:21.
160 Genesis 49:27.
161 Ezekiel 47:8-12.
162 Deuteronomy 9:21 (Hertz translation).
163 II Kings 23:12.
164 Micah 7:19.

165 The Talmud records the opinion of Rabba, son of Bar Hana, that “the soul of one righteous person is equivalent to the whole world.” Bavli Sanhedrin, 103b.

166 Exodus 9-11. In his commentary on this text, M. D. Cassuto says that furnace soot symbolized the hard work of the Jewish workers who burned bricks from straw for the Egyptian builders. The soot remained on the furnace walls. Cassuto adds: “thus it was just that this soot, which resulted as it were from the sweat of the oppressed, should bring punishment on the flesh of the oppressors.” M. D. Cassuto, Commentary on the Book of Exodus. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1959, p. 76. Hebrew.

167 See Leviticus Chapter 16. In Talmudic times, the animal was hurled off a rock, as it was apparently no longer possible to send it to a place whence it could not return to civilization.

168 Kings II 10:27.
169 Isaiah 1:22.
170 Ibid., 1:28.
171 Ibid., 1:25.

172 When the Nazi Adolf Eichmann was condemned to death, his body was burned and the ashes dispersed by boat over the sea, outside the territorial waters of Israel. This highly symbolic act of ‘removing pollution’ from Israel’s boundaries is unique in the State’s history.

173 Isaiah 24:4-6.
174 II Kings 2:19-22.


182 Ibid., p. 200.

183 Genesis 1:1.

184 Rabbi Yaakov Culi (1689–1732), considered an important rabbinical authority in many Sephardi circles. His commentary is written in Ladino.

185 *Hirsch* commentary on Genesis 1:1.

186 Genesis 1:6.

187 Moses Ben Chayim Alschech, (born in Adrianople in 1508; died in Damascus circa 1600), was an important Talmud scholar and Bible commentator.

188 Ovadyah from Sforno, a medical doctor and scientist, was born in Cesena between 1470 and 1475 and died in Bologna around 1550.

189 Isaiah 45:18.

190 Genesis 27.

191 Bavli *Sanhedrin* 38a and *Tanbuma* (Warschau edition) *Pekude* 3.

192 Genesis 4:11.

193 Rashi on Genesis 4:11.

194 Genesis 3:17. See also Rashi on Genesis 1:11.

195 Genesis 6:11.

196 *Zohar* on Genesis 6:11.

197 Genesis 6:12.

198 Rashi on Genesis 6:12.

199 Bavli *Sanbedrin* 108a. The *tusalmi* is apparently a bird which pairs with others not of its own kind.

200 Nachmanides on Genesis 6:12.

201 Genesis 6:13.


203 Genesis 6:18.

204 Genesis *Rabba* 31:12 (Wilna ed.)

205 Me’am Lo’ez on Genesis 6:18.

206 Genesis 8:7.


208 Genesis 8:11–12.

209 Rashi on Genesis 8:11. The original *Midrash* appears in Bavli *Eruvin* 18b in the name of R. Yirmiya Ben-Elazar. A similar text is also found in Bavli *Sanbedrin* 109b in the name of R. Elazar.

210 Genesis 8:20.

211 Rashi on Genesis 8:20. The quote is from Genesis *Rabba* (Wilna ed.) 34:9.
212. Genesis 9:3.
214. Ibid.
216. Exodus Rabba 10:1 (Wilna ed.).
217. We know from the Bible that this was the case with Moses, Jeremiah and Jonah.
227. The Midrash gives additional insights into what Judaism thinks mankind’s attitude toward the environment should be. It also reflects here a sphere of thought which is far from attitudes of ‘destruction for pleasure’. 