

WHOSE GARDEN IS IT?

The water crisis in biblical perspective

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Across Australia, water authorities talk of ongoing drought, catchments at record lows and little rain in sight. How does a biblical understanding of the world and its inhabitants affect our response to the current crisis?



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Another crisis at Warragamba?

Sydney is facing yet another water crisis! In the late 1990s the crisis was one of the water quality at Prospect Reservoir, the main source from which the Metropolitan water supply is distributed. The present crisis arises because of the effects of a prolonged drought affecting the various catchments of Warragamba Dam. The level storage is now well below 50 percent of its capacity. However, not all this water is capable of being fed into the Sydney Metropolitan water supply. We might say, therefore, that we have some 10 to 20 percent of the capacity of Warragamba Dam to supply the needs of Sydney until further substantial rain. As the full capacity of Warragamba is about nine times the volume of Sydney Harbour, we might say that we have the equivalent of Sydney's harbour of 'fresh water' to meet the needs of a city of four million people until such time as we get further substantial rain. However, substantial droughts in Sydney have been known to last for decades.

Who supplies the water?

We secularised peoples of the Western world are not used to being confronted with these kinds of vulnerabilities. The threat of the failure of rain to water the earth was one of the factors influencing the manner in which the cults and rituals of pagan religions was invoked in the attempt to persuade the gods to continue the good order that benefited the well-being of all creatures, including humans.

In the face of the kind of water crisis that could threaten Sydney, how should Christian people respond? I'm sure that there would be many who would seize upon it as an opportunity to emphasise the point that we so-called sophisticated modern Westerners need to turn from our pretended independence from God into an acknowledgment of our need to depend upon Him. This should show itself in our public prayer for rain.

Whilst I do not disagree with the substance of this kind of response, I would like to raise an important question. What makes this kind of response different from that of the pagan one? To say that we are praying to the true God rather than an idol is certainly an important point. However, I would suggest that—at least in biblical terms—it does not get to the substance of the issue. To get an angle on this we may glean something from a consideration of the first chapter of Isaiah.

YHWH¹ on creaturely responsibility

The opening of the book of Isaiah is a very remarkable piece of literature:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth!
For the Lord has spoken:
'I have nourished and brought up children,
and they have rebelled against me;
The ox knows its owner and the donkey
its master's crib;
But Israel does not know, my people do
not understand.' (Isaiah 1:2-3).

The chapter goes on to relate how YHWH is fed up with the kind of worship and sacrifices that are being offered in the temple:

When you come to me to appear before me, who has required this [abomination] from your hand, to trample my courts? (Isaiah 1:12).

The reason for Isaiah's prophetic denunciation of the cultic practices of Israel was not that they were worshipping false gods. Rather, it was the fact that they were approaching YHWH in a similar manner to the pagan cults.

The life of Israel was in crisis. Injustice, corruption, devastation and the failed duty of welfare to the poor and needy was apparent on all sides. The major difference between paganism and the religion of YHWH was to be found in the manner in

which YHWH holds humans responsible for the management of the world. Pagan religiousness does not carry this kind of human responsibility. It looks to the gods for maintaining good order in everything. Israel was coming to worship YHWH in this kind of spirit. As such it failed to appreciate the extent of their covenant-breaking, of their need for repentance and to set about fulfilling the normative requirements of law of God for the life of Israel:

Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)

The present ecological crisis

Unless we plumb the depths of this message of Isaiah, then we too will be guilty of the kind of prophetic critique that he offered the people of Israel more than two and a half thousand years ago.

Whilst its problems have many unique features, Sydney is not the only city in the world needing to confront this kind of

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situation. The problem is global. Large urban populations require adequate reliable water supplies, leading to the need to build dams that, in turn, impact upon the well-being of the various other creaturely environments affected by them. But the problem is global also because of the ways in which the climate, the ecosystems, the forests, the dam systems, the commercial use of land for food production and the balance of gases in the atmosphere are all interrelated on a global scale that, in respect of the human need to manage it, has never before been confronted.

It has become popular in many circles to lay the blame for the current ecological crisis, in which these various 'natural' systems of creation have been placed in jeopardy by human technological innovation, upon the Biblical tradition.²

These accusations usually entail the words 'exercising dominion', in Genesis

1:26-28, being interpreted in the sense of 'dominating with a view to furthering specifically human interests'. There is certainly evidence to suggest that many in the Western world have read the text of Genesis in this way. However, this kind of interpretation needs to be appreciated as 'a world brought to the text'. To claim that 'the world in the text' should be equated with this kind of interpretation is exceedingly doubtful.

A good example of the legitimate target of the criticism levelled by people such as Lynn White is provided by John Locke in Chapter Five of his *Second Treatise on Government*. In the latter work Locke places the legitimacy of all human property rights concerning land and animals consequent upon the exercise of human labour in relation to them.³

Locke's general approach was typical of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As such it certainly influenced the way in which many read the first chapter of Genesis. In so doing it

greatly exaggerates the belief in the human right to exercise a domination of creation by means of technology and lends credibility to the claims of Lynn White and others. The result has been a secularised refurbishment of many corners of the creation into little more than polluted concrete jungles.

Although this kind of Lockean reading of the Bible has contributed to the misshaping of 'the world in front of the text', the point remains that this reading is *not* a legitimate rendering of 'the world in the text'. In the first place, the word 'dominion' in the context of the life of Israel entailed the notion of the dominion of a shepherd over a relatively small flock of sheep.⁴ The whole Old Testament was written against a cultural background in which human dominion over creation was generally in this vein of caring for it. Jesus' parable of the lost sheep, for example, is thoroughly dependent upon this Old Testament background.



Sydney's Warragamba Dam, September 2004, at its lowest level ever—just 39.9 percent capacity. With the state of New South Wales already in the grip of a severe drought, the city of Sydney is currently experiencing its longest drought since the 1930s, and with the population growing at an average of 50,000 per year, it is putting an enormous pressure on the dwindling water supply. With tight restriction on water usage already in place, the government is being pressured to implement even tougher rules, with some reports suggesting the city's water supply may run out in just over three years.

(Matthew 18:10-14). Moreover, the human benefit of looking after the sheep was in direct proportion to the extent to which the shepherd exercised a caring and serving role in respect to the welfare of the sheep. Any exploitation of the sheep or other creatures over which humans exercised dominion had its adverse repercussions in respect to human welfare.

Secondly, the Lockean interpretation of 'dominion' as cultivation and development, was based solely upon a reading of Genesis 1:26-28. The exclusive use of this text to provide the basis for the exploitation of the inanimate, animal and plant kingdoms for human needs has to be counter-balanced by the textual emphasis given in Genesis 2:15. The latter reflects the dual responsibility of human work. The cultivation of creation *as a garden* will only come about if the exercise of human cultural formative power *developing the potential* of the creatures under our dominion is coupled with a *caring for* these creatures as a form of loving service to God. In other words, 'the cultivation' of the potential of the creatures under human dominion cannot legitimately be interpreted in the sense of 'using creation primarily or

exclusively for human benefit’.

The Biblical world *in* the text entails the cultivating of the creation jointly for the benefit of humans and to serve the creaturely needs of the water, the air, the trees, the grasses, the birds, the fish, the whales, the chimpanzees, and their many creaturely cousins.

There has been a general failure by Christian people to take any kind of lead in finding the proper balance between caring for and cultivating creation.

Hence we should see the modern calling to manage the water resources of a large city like Sydney, in Australia, as governed by the calling of Genesis 2:15, *to both care for and cultivate creation as a garden*. It can scarcely be denied that the contemporary problems of the pollution of our earthly land, water and air environments have rendered many aspects of modern city life ‘a smog of death and slime’ that sorely neglects the basic needs not only of many animals and plants, but also of the human population it is meant to serve.

Like so many other aspects of human life, the actual history of the management of water resources reveals that we humans have chosen to ignore the words of God and, as a consequence, have partaken of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The book of Romans speaks of the ways in which humankind suffers as a consequence of ‘exchanging the truth about God for a lie, worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator’. (Romans 1:25). As such its first chapter (especially verses 18-25) raises important questions regarding the way general revelation functions in human life.

Pagan idolatry tends to envision our calling to care for and cultivate the earth by an *undermining* of the importance of the exercise of human cultural formative power in the *cultivation* of the garden. Secular idolatry, on the other hand, tends to envision our dominion in terms of a predominant focus upon human needs being met and furthered through the exercise of our technological power. In the longer run, as contemporary experience is revealing, the

latter tends to neglect the responsibility *to care for* the other creatures that are essential to the make up of the garden.

This level of the drama involved in the (mis)management of water resources, is nowhere better illustrated than in the ways in which the different ‘soils of religiousness’

play out their conflict in the elaborate systems of dams on the great rivers of India—such as the Narmada tributary of the Brahma-Putra flowing into the Arabian sea. On the one hand peasant farmers want to continue to cultivate their crops and animals on the high ground above the banks of these rivers. For generations they have followed this pattern of life in ways that have not required them to participate in an external moneyed economy outside of their immediate peasant community.

On the other hand we have the various Indian state authorities enamoured with the prospect of controlling the vast water resources unleashed by the monsoons for the generation of hydro-electricity as well as the provision of water for irrigation purposes. To this end they want to use the dam systems to store the monsoon rains in ways that raise the level of the waters and threaten the habitability of the lands occupied by the peasant farmers. There is insufficient land to offer compensation by way of a resettlement that would enable these peasant farmers to continue their pattern of life. The acceptance of offers of compensation by way of moneyed handouts involves them in ways of living that are totally foreign to them. When taken up, the results, for the most part, have proved disastrous for their general wellbeing.

In other words, the norm of the Word of God (expressed in Genesis 2:15) for the stewardly management of creation is distorted in two opposite directions. In the case of the peasant farmers, the call to cultivate the garden is influenced by a pagan

idolatry that inhibits the significance of human innovation and development. In the case of the Indian state authorities, the influence of a secular idolatry not only greatly over-estimates our role; it also grossly neglects the calling to care for and serve the needs of other creatures, including those of the human peasant farmers.

The size of the problem

The management problems associated with Sydney water resources are huge. Australia is the driest continent on earth. It is also has the highest degree of variability in its river flow patterns. This is reflected in the fact that we tend either to experience a flood or a drought. The latter is the more usual experience. This situation is greatly exacerbated by two other factors: the ongoing urban growth of the city without any plans for a population ceiling and the unknown effects of global warming upon the climate patterns of eastern Australia.

However in view of this situation, the tragedy is that Christians tend to look upon such problems as secular concerns that either do not matter to God, or else have a low priority. As a result we have fallen prey to a way of reading the Bible that justifies the kind of critique of Lynn White Jr. cited above. The result is a general failure on the part of Christian people to take any kind of lead in facing up to the proper balance between ‘the caring for’ and ‘the cultivation of’ creation, if the realisation of the biblical image of earth as a garden is to result. To achieve this we need a vision for creation management that eschews both the tendencies of the secularism of John Locke as well as the innate pantheism that undergirds much of the green movement. ©

ENDNOTES

- 1 ‘YHWH’ is an accepted way of writing the name of the God of Israel (also ‘Yahweh’).
- 2 Refer, for example to Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, *Science* 155:1203-07, 1967.
- 3 P. Laslett, *Locke’s Two Treatises of Government: a Critical edition with an Introduction and Apparatus Criticus*, (Cambridge University Press, 1970, pp. 303-320).
- 4 Refer, for example, to W. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, John Knox Press, 1982, p32.