

Ecological Narratives and Tropes in the Book of Isaiah

Synopsis

The Bible, until the emergence of social ecology in the 1970's, used to be studied primarily for its account of man's relationship with God. As environmental issues came more and more to occupy public attention, biblical scholars could not possibly ignore the moral, religious implications of the problem. The decisive shift of focus from theology to moral ecology came with two publishing events in the 1960's. In 1962, the biologist Rachel Carson published her book on pollution, *Silent Spring* which alerted the world to the problems caused by modern technology. Then in 1967, the American historian of science Lynn White Jr. published a controversial essay titled: "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crises". In it he blamed Judaeo-Christian beliefs for fostering wrong attitudes to the environment in western society which eventually led to the mindless exploitation of natural resources and pollution of the environment through the application of science and technology. White's essay drew adverse comments from a number of scholars but had the effect of giving biblical studies a decisive thrust towards exploring the interface between man and nature in biblical narrative. It seemed the need of the moment to seek a new understanding of biblical texts, to read them for their ecologically sensitive passages so as to correct the too exclusive emphasis given to the human story and develop a counter-narrative stressing the significance of the natural world in sacred history. *The Green Bible* was published with this object in view. The Earth Bible Project carries this idea further, attempting to read the scripture from the point of view of a personified Earth, animate, conscious and clamorous in protest against the anthropocentric/ theocentric focus.

It is against this background that the present study of *The Book of Isaiah* has been undertaken. This book comprises sixty six chapters composed over a period of about two hundred years from 721 to 538 BCE. Only the first comprising chapters 1 to 39 can be reliably attributed to the author whose name appears in the title. The remainder may have been composed by disciples of Isaiah, the Second Isaiah being responsible for chapters 40-55, the Third Isaiah for chapters 56-66. Between the three sections there is sufficient unity of tone and spirit for the whole collection to be regarded as a single book.

Isaiah of Jerusalem was a prophet of the eighth century BCE. He was preaching to a nation that faced the threat of invasion by foreign powers, to be followed by deportation of people and captivity in a foreign land. Isaiah interprets the imminent danger as God's judgement against the people for a range of transgressions against the covenant obligations which their forefathers had acknowledged towards God.

The focus in this study is on the way the writer imagines and portrays the world of nature and its relationship to the prevailing social, political conditions. Eighth century Israel's history is presented as a segment of a long-standing covenanted relationship of the people with God. Based on this conception the narratives of secular and sacred history are recounted in episodes of judgement, exile and redemption. This narrativization of events is studied along with their figurative constructions as pastoral, wilderness and apocalyptic tropes for their ecological import in a theanthropocentric world of thought.

The critical position adopted for this study is that of social ecology. This theory lays particular stress on the impact of social, political conditions on the environment.

Isaiah's moral ecology shares the same thematic focus, being centrally concerned with the relation between nature and the social order. This thesis has eight chapters including introduction (first chapter) and conclusion.

The second chapter focuses on defining the Judaeo-Christian religion as a historical religion and distinguishes its conceptions of man, God and nature from the animistic conceptions of the mythic worldview. The mythic view of reality is an intuitive apprehension of a dynamic force working through nature. The primitive mind defined this force, giving rise to animism and natural piety. By means of rituals it sought to tap this energy in nature. There did not exist in the primitive mind a sense of moral right and wrong. Classical and romantic pastoral, pantheism and cultural primitivism were historical manifestations of the impulse in civilized man to seek a closer contact with nature in a world governed by rational formulations of relations with the environment.

The Judaeo-Christian religion is a monotheistic faith, founded on belief in a God that created the world and could not be identified with it. This God governs the world in its evolution through history. Man occupies a central place in creation. His relationship to God and the world is governed by the moral law. Although man is given a dominion over nature he can not exercise his authority in a selfish arbitrary way. His relationship to the world is one of responsible stewardship. He must respect the sacred otherness of every single creature. Nothing could be enslaved or possessed, therefore, not even the land. These points could be illustrated by several texts in Scripture.

The third chapter fills in the background on prophetism as an institution in ancient Israel. It examines the nature of prophecy and the role of the prophet. After a

brief description of the history of Israelite prophecy, discussion moves on to a consideration of prophecy's connection with the religion of Israel. The chapter concludes with an account of the rhetorical devices used by prophets.

By prophecy one understands the mediation and interpretation of the divine mind and will. The prophet communicated to his people the messages he received in dreams, visions and ecstatic or mystical experiences. Biblical tradition traces the origins of Israelite prophecy to Moses. Early Israelite history speaks of groups of ecstatic persons who prophesied and were known as '*nabis*'. Music and dance heightened their exotic and vaguely religious performances. From the eighth century BCE on, we encounter the classical prophets whose oracles and sayings have been preserved in Scripture.

The classical prophet's concern focused mainly on such values as *monotheism* (one God, with whom Israel considered itself to live in a sacred partnership or covenant) and *morality as related to religion*, which is seldom found in religions of ancient world. Israel was called to be holy in imitation of God himself. Another important topic in prophetic teaching is *messianism*. God punishes infidelity to his covenant (partnership). Israel is humiliated for its sins. But at some future date God's kingdom on earth will be restored. God's vice-regent, his *Messiah*, anointed to royal dignity, reigned in that kingdom.

Typically, prophecies express judgement of the people's moral conduct, on the basis of the Mosaic alliance between God and Israel. They teach sublime truths and lofty morals. They contain exhortations, threats, announcements of punishment, and promises of deliverance, made with solemn authority and in highly imaginative

language. In the affairs of men, their prime concern is the interests of God, especially in what pertains to the chosen people through whom the Messiah is to come.

In content, the literary genre of prophecy uses warning and threat besides exhortation and promise to declare in God's name events of the near and distant future.

The fourth chapter focuses on Isaiah's land ideology for the crucial role it plays in his theological construction of human-nature relationship. Isaiah appeals to his audiences' inherited lore of land as inheritance which has deep roots in ancestral and primeval history. The Garden of Eden and its later inflection, "Promised Land", both represent land with all its creatures and riches as God's gift to man, but a gift tied up with an ethic of duty and responsibility enshrined in a covenant relationship. The second part of this chapter examines the problematic relation of this notion to the secular history of the formation of Israel.

The fifth chapter tries to outline the ecosocial narration in The Book of Isaiah. Here one distinguishes two levels of narration, those of secular and sacred history. The events of the secular history are: war, conquest, exile and restoration. Isaiah was preaching to a nation that he considered to have reneged on its moral and spiritual commitments. He was alerting them to the dangers that lay ahead. His warnings fell on deaf ears. Divine judgement could not be averted. War and conquest left the country devastated: forests cut down, crops burnt, cities reduced to rubble. People were deported first to Assyria, and in later war, to Babylon. Not until the Persians had conquered Babylon were the exiles in that land allowed to return home and rebuild the Temple. This is secular history. However, the prophet does not stop at reporting the bare facts of secular history. He is concerned with interpreting their implications as

well. Such history is primarily interpretative and, in the Old Testament, its purpose is to disclose the action of the living God in the affairs of men. For this reason, one speaks of it as “sacred history”; here the writers’ primary concern is to bring out the divine or supernatural dimension in history.

Accordingly, Isaiah places the events of the secular narrative into the matrix of sacred history of which the governing concept is that of a covenant between YHWH and his people. Beginning with the covenant of works at creation, these sacred partnerships continue down through ancestral and patriarchal history, renewed from time to time with Abraham, Noah, Moses and David. The Mosaic covenant is explicitly bilateral, binding people to obedience to the law and YHWH to generous provision for people and the land. Violation of covenant loyalty on the part of the people brings on judgement.

In this story of God’s dealings with human, nature functions as the arena of judgement. The land as the physical basis of human existence has always figured in Hebrew scripture. God places the first man and woman in a garden he has planted. This place is a cornucopia of natural resources. The subsequent narrative, one might almost read as a sequence of episodes of exile and restoration, with the Promised Land- the land flowing with milk and honey- as the dominating image: expulsion from Eden, dispossession of land by the Flood, restoration of land after the Flood, the promise to Abraham concerning Canaan, exile in Egypt, Exodus and forty years of wanderings in the desert as a stateless, dispropertied, unaccommodated people, entry into the promised land, prosperity of the land made conditional on covenant loyalty. It is this covenant obligation that Isaiah alludes to in several of his oracles. This same motif lies behind the

famous opening verses of the book. For a people that has passed from nomadic to settled life, stable land holdings, assurance of rain and sun at the right time, freedom from human depredation and natural disasters are of vital consequence. Isaiah draws upon the notion of land as inheritance that he shares with his people. He appeals to their historical memory: this is the land they made their own by conquest and settlement, with the whole weight of patriarchal tradition to legitimize it. For centuries they have lived here and worked the land, its hills and valleys, its orchards and vineyards have yielded plentiful crops of grain, wine and oil. Here David established his kingdom; in Jerusalem he set up the Ark of the Covenant. Solomon made the city the seat of a powerful monarchy. He built a magnificent temple to house the Ark of the Covenant which found favour with YHWH as his dwelling on earth. Solomon built a royal palace of like magnificence. Temple and court provided the local points of Israelites religions and political organization. Thus Isaiah's preaching appeals strongly to the long term implication of his people in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work. Alike in covenant cursings and covenant blessings, the fortunes of the people are tied in with the fortunes of the land. To the believing community, physical exile from the land was of a piece with spiritual exile.

Corresponding to the two layers of narrative- secular and sacred- in Isaiah's text, one can distinguish two different formulations of the resolution: one couched in realistic terms' the other highly symbolic and idealistic.

The realistic version portrays a happy, contented farming life: rain at appointed times, rich soil, plentiful harvest, cattle grazing in spacious meadows, running streams on every high mountain and lofty hill. The symbolic version pictures a world of

transcendent harmony and peace, a world freed from predation and destruction: lion lying down with the lamb; infant playing at the cobra's den etc...

The next two chapters- i.e., chapters six and seven, zooms in on the figurative frame of the prophetic text. The above narratives of man-nature interrelationships are underscored by a tropological discourse that makes use of every resource of metaphorical, analogical and associative modes of connection and argumentation. It is a discourse in which fact, imagination and myth are integrally fused. Simile, metaphor, metonymy, apostrophe, rhetorical question, hyperbole and pathetic fallacy are among the figures employed to convey the dynamic of a natural world that is not a mere backdrop to the divine human drama but an independent locus of action and value, relative to man.

The vast assemblage of natural images employed by the prophet have been found to crystallize around dominant cultural constructions of nature such as pastoral, wilderness and apocalypse that have struck deep roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The notion of a pristine, original space lost by human misdemeanor runs through pastoral and wilderness tropes while the hope or fear of some final destination for human struggles with nature saturates apocalyptic visions.

Thus Isaiah begins with the assumption of a lost pastoral arcadia, the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey: men have transgressed the law and lost their rights to this land. The book opens with a covenant law-suit in which humans are arraigned before 'cosmic' witness and compared unfavourably with animals. The first book of Isaiah pictures a society doomed to the afflictions of judgement and largest number of natural images employed foretell devastation of the environment in war, drought, storm,

flood or earthquake. Now and then, one catches a glimpse of the pastoral idyll, as in the parable of the vineyard, a glimpse of fulfilled and fulfilling life and work. Or, one might come upon exquisite evocations of a spiritualized pastoral that merges human and non-human, inner and outer worlds in a seamless whole of thought and feeling.

Isaiah's use of natural images not only evokes the literal object in its sensuous immediacy but involves us in the images world. The image draws the reader into a field of associated commonplaces and enables him to construct a corresponding system of implications about the tenor. It is a dynamic relation in which the vehicle does not merely convey information that might have been communicated literally; it establishes an emotional relation that modifies our perception of both the principal subject and the image substituted.

Major conclusions to be drawn from this study on the ecological narratives and tropes are:

Isaiah's theanthropic world of thought is not incompatible with the view that concedes to the natural world its intrinsic worth and value. Far from being an impassive background to the human story, nature is an independent sphere of action and a player in the narrative.

Nature, in the oracles of judgement, functions as an arena of human striving through trials and tribulations towards the longed-for ideal of peace and harmony. In this understanding, nature is an instrument of divine judgement, a means of rewarding virtue and punishing transgressions. This may be understood as the working out of a moral law inherent in the created world. It is not as if God pronounced a judgement

each time a transgression took place. Rather, it is the case that he would allow the embodied moral law to take its course naturally.

The ideal set before man is one of interdependence between the world of nature and the world of man. Justice and righteousness, as Isaiah conceives them, are not just ethical qualities, concerned exclusively with the relation between YHWH and his people. They are a reflection of the fundamental world order established by YHWH which includes the well-being of the natural world.

The point of divergence of interest starts at the juncture of corporate reading of the biblical texts with Man (with a capital 'M') at the center of the created world order. The present study is an attempt at bringing the focus back to the point of human agency and responsibility for the environment and also an attempt at exploring a striking coincidence of views between Isaiah's moral ecology and secular social ecology.