*Series:*

Ecospirituality and Interbeing

*Episode:*

***4. Reading the Land***

**- Biblical Voices, Modern Ears**

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**The Land Speaks**

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# The Land Speaks

## — Biblical Voices, Modern Ears

*Wow — did Hosea just describe collapsing fish stocks? Can the ground actually cry out? Turns out the Bible has been sitting on some surprisingly urgent ecological insights for three millennia. Ancient writers, limited horizons — and yet… Come and see.*

### 1: Wait - the Ground Can Cry Out?

Let's start with something that stopped me in my tracks the first time I really sat with it.

In Genesis 4, after Cain kills Abepoll, God doesn't just confront Cain about what he's done. God says: *"Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground."* And then - and this is the part we tend to skip past - the ground itself speaks. It has "opened its mouth" to receive Abel's blood. It is, in some sense, a witness. A participant. Almost a victim.

Now, I know what you might be thinking. These are ancient storytellers working with a vivid, poetic imagination. They personified everything - wind, water, fire. This is just literary colour, right?

Maybe. But stay with it for a moment.

Because a few books later, in Job 31, we find Job swearing his innocence with an extraordinary oath: *"If I have mistreated my land, if I have made its furrows weep - then let thorns come up instead of wheat."* Job is treating the land as something that can be wronged. Something that registers injustice. Something with, if not exactly feelings, then at least a kind of moral sensitivity to how it is treated.

This is not how most of us were taught to think about soil.

We live in a world that has spent several centuries treating land primarily as a resource - something to be owned, extracted from, optimised, and when necessary, discarded. And many of us, if we're honest, absorbed that assumption without even noticing it, including in our reading of Scripture.

But the biblical writers - working from within their own cultural moment, their own agricultural anxieties, their own local cosmology - kept

***Creation's Liturgical Participation***

“The valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing.” – *Psalms 65:13*

bumping into something they couldn't quite shake: the land is not just stuff. It is, in some sense, alive to what happens on it.

That's worth sitting with. Especially right now.

### 2: It Was Always Personal Between God and the Soil

Here's a passage that rarely makes it into sermons, but probably should.

In Deuteronomy 11, Moses is preparing the people to enter Canaan, and he draws a fascinating contrast between Egypt and the land they're heading toward. Egypt, he says, is a land you irrigate yourself - you work it with your feet, like a vegetable garden. You are in control. But Canaan? Canaan is different. Canaan "drinks rain from heaven." And then comes the line that should fascinate theologians and ecologists alike: it is a land "the eyes of the LORD your God are always on, from the beginning of the year to its end."

God watches this land. Personally. Continuously.

Now, let's be honest about the cultural filter here. The writer is drawing on a very specific comparison - the Nile irrigation system versus the rain-dependent agriculture of the Levant - and using it to make a theological point about dependence and covenant. This is local knowledge extended or extrapolated to cosmic truth, something we encounter in many places in scripture. The biblical writers were not writing universal environmental policy. They were writing from within specific landscapes, specific weather patterns, specific anxieties about harvest and survival.

And yet…

What they arrived at, almost as a byproduct of their local concerns, is a remarkably relational vision of land. This is not land as property. This is land as a space of relationship - between God, people, and the earth itself. The land has a constitution. It has a history. It has, in this extraordinary phrase, *the eyes of God upon it*.

For modern readers - Christian or otherwise - who are trying to think about why the planet matters, why ecological damage is not merely a practical problem but a moral and even spiritual one, this vision of land-as-relational-space is a genuinely useful resource. Not because the ancient writers were environmentalists in any modern sense. But because they were reaching, in their own way, toward something true.

### 3: Hosea Saw the Fish Dying. Sound Familiar?

Of all the passages we'll look at in this reflection, Hosea 4:1-3 is the one that tends to make people do a double-take when they first encounter it. So let's just read it slowly.

*"There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away."*

Fish dying. Birds disappearing. Beasts wasting away. All as a direct consequence of moral and covenantal failure.

Now, Hosea was not writing about industrial pollution or ocean acidification. He was a prophet operating in eighth-century BCE Israel, diagnosing a specific crisis of covenant faithfulness in a specific community. His frame of reference was local, his literary mode was prophetic poetry, and his intended audience was a people who understood themselves to be in a binding relationship with a God who had very particular expectations of them.

All of that is true. And the liberal theological instinct to acknowledge these filters is, I think, a healthy one. We do the text no favours by pretending it fell from heaven fully formed, untouched by the cultural hands that shaped it.

But here is what is so striking. When Hosea traces the chain of consequence from human moral failure to ecological collapse, he is describing something that environmental scientists have been documenting with increasing alarm for decades. The causal logic - human behaviour degrades the relational fabric of community, and that degradation ripples outward into the non-human world - turns out to be not just poetically resonant but empirically observable.

We don't have to choose between "this is inspired

***The Land's Covenantal Constitution***

"It is a land the LORD your God cares for; the eyes of the LORD your God are continually on it ... – *Deuteronomy 11:12*

Scripture" and "this is a culturally conditioned ancient text." It can be both. And being both, it can still speak with uncomfortable clarity to a world watching fish stocks collapse and bird populations decline.

Hosea might appreciate the irony that we finally have the data to prove his point.

**4: Rest Was Never Just for People**

Ask most Christians what the sabbath is about and you'll get answers that cluster around human spiritual renewal. A day off. Time with God. Rest from the treadmill of productivity. All of which is true and good.

But go back to Leviticus 25 and you'll find something that tends to get quietly overlooked in sabbath conversations. The land gets a sabbath too.

Every seventh year, the Israelites were commanded to let their fields lie fallow. No sowing, no pruning, no harvesting. The land rests "unto the LORD." And every fiftieth year - the jubilee - the rest goes deeper still. Debts are cancelled, slaves are freed, and the land returns to its original distribution. The whole economic and ecological order hits a reset button.

Now, the practical wisdom here is not negligible. Fallow years allow soil to recover. They prevent the kind of exhaustion that turns fertile land into dust. Ancient farmers understood, even without modern soil science, that the land has limits that must be respected. This is hard-won agricultural knowledge encoded into religious law - a good example of how the biblical writers were working with the best understanding available to them in their time and place.

But the theological framing goes beyond practicality. The land's rest is described as sabbath *unto the LORD.* The land has its own relationship with God. Its own rhythm that is not subordinate to human economic need. Its own rights, almost, within the covenant order.

Leviticus 26 makes the consequences of ignoring this stark: if the people refuse to give the land its sabbaths, then during their exile the land will take them anyway, and "enjoy its sabbaths" in their absence. The land will recover, with or without human cooperation. It is not infinitely patient with those who refuse to respect its rhythm.

There is a modern land management philosophy called regenerative agriculture that is essentially rediscovering these principles through a scientific lens - the importance of rest, rotation, recovery, and working with natural cycles rather than against them. It is fascinating, and maybe not entirely coincidental, that it rhymes so closely with a text written three thousand years ago.

**5: The Land Has Its Own Worship Service**

This might be the most joyful section, so let's enjoy it.

Psalm 65 is a harvest psalm, probably sung in the Temple during a season of good rains and abundant crops. And about two thirds of the way through it, something lovely happens. The psalmist stops describing what God does for the land and starts describing what the land does in response:

*"The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing."*

Valleys singing. Meadows celebrating. The whole landscape caught up in something that can only be called worship.

Psalm 96 and Psalm 98 go even further. "Let the sea resound, and everything in it... let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy." These are not merely decorative metaphors. Within the world the psalmists inhabited, creation was not the backdrop to the human story - it was a participant in the divine story. It had its own standing before God. Its own voice in the cosmic liturgy.

Now, a critical reader will rightly note that this is poetry, and poetry does things that prose cannot. We should be careful about reading too much literal ecology into metaphors of singing rivers. The psalmists were drawing on a rich ancient Near Eastern tradition of nature poetry that was common across the cultures of their region. This was a fashionable mode of writing, as well as a genuine

***Creation's Liturgical Participation***

“Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy.” – *Psalms 98:8*

***The Eschatological Land***

"The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox." – *Isaiah 65:25*

theological instinct.

But here is what the poetry is doing theologically, even if we hold it lightly: it is insisting that creation has value in itself, not merely as a resource for human use. The mountains don't sing because they are useful to us. They sing because they have their own relationship with the God who made them.

This is a concept that modern environmental ethics calls "intrinsic value" - the idea that nature matters for its own sake, not just instrumentally. Philosophers and ecologists have worked hard to establish this idea in secular terms. The psalmists got there through poetry. Different route, remarkably similar destination.

**6: Ancient Writers, Limited Horizons - and Still Surprisingly Far-Sighted**

Let's pause here and be honest about something, as befits the subject.

The biblical writers did not know what we know. They had no conception of global climate systems, of carbon cycles, of the interconnected web of ecosystems that makes planetary life possible. They wrote from within small, specific worlds - a particular stretch of the Levant, a particular set of agricultural concerns, a particular cosmology in which the earth was flat, the sky was a dome, and weather was a direct expression of divine approval or displeasure.

When they described the land mourning or the rain failing, they were not describing atmospheric science. They were describing what they could see and feel and smell, interpreted through the only framework they had - covenant relationship with a personal God. To avoid needless polemics, let's be clear that I'm not saying here that the covenant idea was mistaken and had no divine grace flowing into it.

But sometimes the way that framework was interpreted directly and physically led the ancients badly astray. The assumption that drought is divine punishment and abundance is divine reward has caused real harm - to communities who blamed themselves for natural disasters, to theologies that equated poverty with moral failure. We should not romanticise the biblical ecological vision or pretend it would pass modern tests.

But here is what strikes me, and what keeps drawing me back to these texts.

Working within those limited horizons, filtered through those cultural assumptions, shaped by those fashionable literary modes - the biblical writers kept arriving at insights that turn out to be remarkably durable. That the land is not infinitely exploitable. That human moral behaviour and ecological health are connected. That rest and recovery are not optional extras but structural necessities. That creation has its own standing before God, its own voice, its own trajectory.

They got to these places not through science but through sustained, attentive, often anguished reflection on what it means to live in covenant with a God who made the world and continues to care about it. And who can exclude grace and spiritual intuition from such a process?

They achieved a holistic eco-understanding, which they saw as part of their covenant or pact with God, and such an understanding would hold its own even in modern terms. And for communities of faith today trying to find their ecological footing in a crisis they did not create but have certainly contributed to, it may be precisely the kind of resource they need.

**7: Paul Heard the Groaning Too**

By the time we get to Paul's letter to the Romans, written in the middle of the first century CE, the cultural and theological world has shifted considerably from the world of Hosea or the Psalmists. Paul is writing in Greek, thinking in categories shaped by both Jewish tradition and Greco-Roman philosophy, and addressing communities spread across the Mediterranean world.

And yet in Romans 8, he writes something that connects directly to everything we have been tracing:

*"The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed... the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."*

Creation groaning. Waiting. Longing for liberation.

Paul's frame here is eschatological - he is talking about the end times, the final redemption, the re-

***The Land's Covenantal Constitution***

“Then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain…” – *Deuteronomy 11:14*

vealing of God's glory – and maybe the incarnation seeking to complete itself. His cultural moment shapes the way he expresses it. But what he is insisting on is theologically striking: creation is not merely the stage on which the human drama of salvation plays out. It has its own stake in the outcome. Its own longing for liberation from "bondage to decay."

Colossians 1 pushes even further - the reconciliation accomplished through Christ extends to "all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven." The healing is not just for people. It is cosmic in scope.  And it is already a warning about our management of earth-orbital space, and the wasteful, polluting and dangerous use of space exploration

Now, Paul was not an environmentalist. He almost certainly expected the current world order to end within his own generation. We should be careful about conscripting his eschatology into a modern ecological programme without acknowledging that the contexts are radically different.

But the theological instinct embedded in these texts - that the non-human creation has its own relationship with God, its own wound, and its own place in the story of redemption - is a genuinely powerful resource for communities trying to think about why the planet matters in ultimate terms. And many of us do have an intuition that it does matter. Not just practically. Not just aesthetically. But cosmically.

**8: So What Do We Do With All This?**

Here is where a different kind of reflection might have given you a tidy action list. Plant a tree. Reduce your carbon footprint. Write to your elected representative. All of which are fine things to do, and none of which I want to discourage.

But our reflection today has been about something slightly different - about what happens when you go back to these old texts with fresh eyes and find that they have been sitting on a vision of the land that our culture largely forgot, and that we may now urgently need to recover.

What strikes me, looking across everything we have covered, is that the biblical writers were working with a fundamentally relational understanding of the earth. Not the earth as property. Not the earth as resource. Not even the earth as backdrop. But the earth as a body in covenant - morally sensitive, capable of response, participant in worship, entitled to rest, groaning toward redemption.

That vision was always filtered through local knowledge and cultural assumption. It was never perfectly expressed, never free of the distortions of its time. But it kept breaking through, in poetry and prophecy and law and letter, insisting that the land is not just stuff.

And now, in a moment when the land is groaning in ways that are measurable and documented and deeply alarming, these ancient voices are worth listening to again. Not as a substitute for science. Not as a magical solution. But as a reminder that the intuition behind ecological care is older and deeper than modernity, and that communities of faith have resources in their own tradition that they may not fully have claimed.

So here is the question this reflection wants to leave you with - not an answer, but a genuine question worth sitting with:

*If the biblical writers, working with ancient eyes and limited horizons, could still arrive at a vision of the land as a living, morally sensitive, covenant body deserving of care and rest - what might we arrive at, if we brought that same attentiveness to the world we actually live in now?*

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***The Land's Eschatological Healing***

“I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water…” – *Isaiah 41:18*

## The Land as Covenant Body

Biblical Imagery of Ecological Sensitivity

and the Healing of the Land

**The Land as a Subject, Not Just an Object.** Genesis 4:10-12 — the ground "opens its mouth" to receive Abel's blood and then "curses" Cain. The land is already a moral witness and participant in the very first murder. Job 31:38-40 — Job swears that if he has wronged anyone, "may my land cry out against me and its furrows weep." The land has a voice and an emotional life.

**The Land's Covenantal Constitution.** Deuteronomy 11:10-12 is remarkable — the land of Canaan is distinguished from Egypt precisely by its ecological character. Egypt is irrigated by human foot-labour; Canaan drinks rain "from heaven," meaning it is directly dependent on God's attention. The land is described as one "the eyes of the LORD your God are always on." It has divine surveillance as part of its constitution.

**The Land Mourning.** Hosea 4:1-3 is perhaps the most ecologically explicit passage in the entire Hebrew Bible. Because there is "no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land," the text says: "the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away." *This is a direct causal chain from covenant failure to ecological collapse* — anticipating modern environmental theology remarkably closely.

**The Land Mourning.** Jeremiah 12:4 and 12:10-11 echo this — "how long will the land mourn and the grass of every field wither?" Jeremiah's "weeping prophet" dimension extends to the land itself weeping.

**Sabbath and Jubilee as Ecological Theology.** Leviticus 25 is foundational here. The sabbath year and jubilee are not merely social or economic institutions — the land is given rest "unto the LORD." The land has its own rhythm of labour and rest that must be respected. Violating this is presented in Leviticus 26:34-43 as a wound the land will heal by force during exile. This is perhaps the closest the Bible comes to what we would *call sustainable land management as theological obligation.*

**Prophetic Indictment of *Ecological Damage.*** Isaiah 24:4-6 — "the earth dries up and withers...the earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant." The language of defilement connects moral and ecological corruption inseparably. *This passage has been called by some scholars a proto-ecological theology of planetary crisis.*

**Strong Sheep and Ecological Damage.** Ezekiel 34:17-19 — God indicts the "strong sheep" who muddy the water and trample the pasture, leaving nothing clean for the weak. This extends covenant responsibility explicitly to *how the powerful treat shared natural resources*.

**Creation's Liturgical Participation.** Psalm 65:9-13 is a sustained meditation on the land as a worshipping body — God "waters its ridges abundantly," the valleys "shout for joy and sing." The land does not merely receive blessing; it responds with praise. Psalm 96:11-12 and 98:7-8 similarly have the sea, fields, rivers, and hills breaking into song at the coming of God's justice. This liturgical participation of the land is theologically important— if the land praises, it has standing. It is a covenant *partner*, not merely a resource.

**The Land's Eschatological Healing.** Romans 8:19-22 is the New Testament's most direct engagement with this theme — creation "groans as in the pains of childbirth," waiting for liberation from its "bondage to decay." Paul extends covenantal personhood to the whole created order. The land is not merely a backdrop to human salvation; it has its own liberation trajectory.

**Eschatological Healing of the Cosmos.** Colossians 1:19-20 adds that reconciliation through Christ extends to "all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven" — the healing of the covenant body is cosmic in scope.

**Wisdom Literature's Ecological Grounding.** Proverbs 8:22-31 presents Wisdom as present at creation, delighting in the inhabited world. Job 38-39, where God answers Job from the whirlwind, is an extended meditation on the wildness and independence of creation — the rain falls where no human walks, the wild ox will not serve, the ostrich is given no wisdom yet survives. Creation has its own integrity entirely apart from human use. This is a remarkably strong biblical foundation for *intrinsic ecological value, as* distinct from a merely instrumental value as resource for humans.

**The Eschatological Land.** Isaiah 65:17-25 envisions the new creation in deeply ecological terms — people will plant vineyards and eat their fruit, build houses and inhabit them, and the wolf and lamb will feed together. The new covenant is not disembodied; it is a restored land-community relationship. The healing is material and ecological, not only spiritual.

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***Wisdom Literature's Ecological Grounding***

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand." – *Job 38:4*