**Original scientific article / Izvorni znanstveni članak**
Received / Zaprimljen: 23. 11. 2021.
https://doi.org/10.21860/j.14.1.1

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# Safeguarding the Environment in the Light of the Covenant

**SUMMARY**

When the Biblical foundations of Christian environmental ethics are discussed, emphasis is usually placed on the theology of creation. However, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church starts with confidence based on the experience of Exodus, and states that "this reflection permits us to look to the future with hope, sustained by the promise and the covenant that God continually renews". I argue that the theology of the covenant (not only with Noah) could and should supplement the traditional biblical themes used in the environmental discussion. The motif of the covenant not only links together various biblical texts relevant to environmental ethics, e.g. the story of Noah, Moses' laws protecting animals, rules for the Sabbath, and prophetic visions of renewal, but also provides practical inspiration for environmentally responsible behavior.

**Keywords**: Environmental ethics, Christian ethics, the Old Testament, the Covenant.

## INTRODUCTION

When discussing environmental issues, the traditional rendering of the Bible asks "What should we do?" and starts literally from Adam in discussing the theology of creation and its implications (John Paul II & Bartholomew I, 2002; Marschütz, 2011, p. 351-360). Pope Francis (2015, p. 65) begins the biblical argument in his encyclical *Laudato si'* with the following words: "Without repeating the entire theology of creation, we can ask what the great biblical narratives say about the relationship of human beings with the world". He then stresses the dignity of both

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[**] This study is a result of research funded by the internal grant agency of Palacký University IGA_CMTF_2021_009 "Continuity – Discontinuity – Advance".

mankind and nature, discussing the consequences of sin. He encourages us to respect God's plan for nature since God the Creator is also God the Savior.

The strategy of this presentation is clear. It first and foremost focuses on the right understanding of the contemporary situation. The world is God's creation and has to be treated as such, while the contemporary crisis is a consequence of human sin. Therefore, it may only be overcome by rejecting evil and obeying God. The Sabbath, as the climax of creation (Neusner, 2004, p. 78), enriches the discussion by emphasizing respect for the order and rhythm of creation (Fretheim, 1991, p. 230).

I will argue that the traditional Christian theological approach to the ecological crisis, which involves consulting only the creation narrative and several other biblical places, should be supplemented by a more comprehensive approach that introduces the motif of the covenant into the discussion. This links together various biblical texts relevant to environmental ethics, e.g. the story of Noah, Moses' laws protecting animals, rules for the Sabbath, and prophetic visions of renewal, and also provides practical inspiration for environmentally responsible behavior.

## BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH

A growing body of literature demonstrates that contemporary environmental challenges cannot be solved only by advances in science and technology, and by raising public awareness about ecological disasters and protective behavior. I will list four pressing issues to which, covenant theology can bring new insights.

The first challenge is to foster *basic trust*. Each person needs a "general sense of the correspondence between one's needs and one's world" (Wrightsman, 1992, p. 202), which, in this context, represents the need for a predictable and lasting environment. In contrast to this need, "apocalyptic discourse is a major mediating frame through which publics have come to engage with the issue of climate change, and by proxy with wider green politics" (McNeish, 2017, p. 1037). This framing, which can be described as climate fatalism, has a negative effect on behavioral change (Mayer & Keith, 2019, p. 518). In other words, apocalyptic discourse leads the public to lose interest in the dangers they cannot change and to devote their efforts to areas where change is achievable.

The second challenge is to positively re-frame pro-environmental behavior. If "going green" is presented as "a personal sacrifice or burden for the collective good," the desired lifestyle change is hindered (Prinzing, 2020, p. 2). A much more effective way is to present the behavioral change in terms of intrinsic values, e.g. personal growth and achievement or the strengthening of social ties.

The third challenge is to take into consideration the interaction between knowledge and personal attitudes. Relevant research indicates that education is not enough to change consumer behavior patterns. Although it tends to have a positive effect on pro-climate views among American liberals and Democrats, for example, it has the opposite effect among American conservatives and Republicans (McCright et al., 2016, pp. 186, 233). According to Kahan et al. (2012, p. 731), a hierarchical and individualistic worldview predicts the negative effect of science literacy. "In contrast, people who hold an egalitarian, communitarian world-view – one favouring less regimented forms of social organization and greater collective attention to individual needs – tend to be morally suspicious of commerce and industry, to which they attribute social inequity". In other words, if the sense of *unity* based on the values of equity and solidarity is strengthened, this may increase the positive effects of environmental education.

The last challenge concerns personal choices. Science can follow trends and general influences, but when it comes to personal decisions, whether by politicians or ordinary citizens, they stem from free choice. No matter whether at climate conferences or in everyday life, individual decisions depend on whether a particular person decides exclusively according to their personal short-term interests, or takes into consideration the common good. The process of shifting the focus from self-interest "to the community of life within which we live" is sometimes called ecological conversion (Ormerod & Vanin, 2016, p. 351).

As will be shown, these four challenges have one thing in common: they can be related to the motif of the covenant in their theological discussion. This motif is not frequent in the encyclical letter *Laudato si'* (Pope Francis, 2015), and is mentioned only once, in the headline "Educating for the Covenant Between Humanity and Environment" (before paragraph 209). Unfortunately, it is not clear which kind of covenant is intended in this place, since the term is not explicated in the following text.

There is one more comprehensive treatise, however, on environmental issues, namely the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, especially its chapter 10. While the book as a whole mostly summarizes pontifical teaching, this specific chapter presents more of the authors' insights since it was published before the "green encyclical". Specifically, the "biblical" part of the chapter (paragraphs 451–455) does not quote any document and is not quoted in *Laudato si'* (Pope Francis, 2015).

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace approaches ecological issues in the Compendium from an original perspective: "*The living experience of the divine presence in history is the foundation of the faith of the people of God*: 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand' (Deuteronomy

6:21)." Surprisingly, it is not creation which stands as the starting point for the whole argument, but the experience of Exodus, closely followed by the history of Abram (Deuteronomy 26:5; Joshua 24:3).

The first paragraph concludes: "This reflection permits us to look to the future with hope, sustained by the promise and the covenant that God continually renews." (Pontifical Council For Justice And Peace, 2004, p. 451). Why does the Compendium start here? The reasons are both biblical and political. On the one hand, the experience of Exodus is central to the Old Testament, while, on the other hand, the council wanted to distance themselves from certain contemporary apocalyptic visions. In the following section, I will explore the motif of the covenant in Christian environmental ethics and point to its practical implications.

## THE THEOLOGIES OF THE COVENANT AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

The authors of the Compendium may have relied on the existing theological discussion to introduce the covenant motif. Although this motif does not appear very often in Christian environmental ethics, it is growing in popularity. It was the book *The Cosmic Covenant* (1992) by the Jesuit and Old Testament scholar from Heythropp College Robert Murray, that provoked the interest in this biblical motif. The author demonstrated that the cosmic dimension of the covenant in the Old Testament is much more fundamental than a few explicit statements about the covenant with creation might suggest (e.g. Genesis 9:8-11, Jeremiah 33:20-21). The basic components of the covenant, namely *mishpat* ("justice") and *tsedeq* ("righteousness"), also have their cosmic dimension, and should be translated as "right order" and "rightness".

Murray's vision of a cosmic covenant has been embraced by a number of Christian environmental ethicists. For instance, Michael S. Northcott further developed this vision in *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (1996) and later in *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (2007). He links here the Old Testament covenant to order in creation, respect for which is a condition for the fruitfulness of the earth (p. 12). Sunil M. Caleb (2002) has engaged the covenant theme in discussions of economic development and policy. The Hebrew Bible, he argues, overcomes the anthropocentric conception by viewing environmental ethics as "responsible use of the natural world," because commitment to the health of the world is fundamental to the purpose of creation. In his view, the cosmic covenant reveals "a fundamental link between injustice, greed and sin in society, and ecological destruction." (Caleb, 2002, p. 47). Douglas J. Moo (2006, p. 452, footnote 15) ranks analyses of the

"cosmic covenant" among the most productive literature in environmentally oriented theology. Brandon R. Frick (2014) summarized the entire discussion of the role of the covenant in Christian ecological ethics in his dissertation *Covenantal Ecology: The Promise of Covenant for a Christian Environmental Ethic*. Most recently, Nicola L. Bull (2020, pp. 170-171) has included covenant among her six biblical principles of the "Green Gospel".

Here, the covenant is discussed in three senses: the covenant consisting of the act of creation, the tripartite covenant among God, humans, and other living beings, and the individual provisions of the Sinai covenant. Firstly, the act of creation itself can be described as a declaration of covenant. Indeed, the Hebrew term for covenant, *berit*, has a wider semantic field than the English word "covenant": it can also mean a stipulation or arrangement. This is consistent with the fact that the Semites understood creation, not as *creatio ex nihilo* but as a conquest of chaos and the institution of cosmic order. This idea is behind the Lord's statement in Jeremiah 33:20-21:

> "If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night,
> so that day and night would not come at their appointed time,
> only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken,
> so that he would not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with my ministers the Levites."

In contrast to this statement of Jeremiah, it is striking that at no point in the opening chapters of Genesis is creation referred to as a covenant. It seems that the author's "plan led him to hold back the concept of the covenant until the Flood narrative, when he would begin his carefully arranged succession of covenants with their signs, to culminate in the Mosaic covenant" (Murray, 1992, p. 1).

Furthermore, the concept of the threefold covenant comes from the story of Noah, to whom the Lord says, "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that is with you" (Gen 9:9). According to Frick (2014, p. 67), this is a covenant between three parties, which thus also governs the relationship between man and other creatures. The diction of the covenant implies, however, that it is a bilateral covenant initiated by the Lord. He makes the covenant into which he invites man and with him all creation. What unites man and other creatures is that they participate in the same covenant with the Lord (Hiers, 1996, p. 137), not that they have a covenant with each other.

Finally, the Mosaic laws, including those governing the relationship between man and other creatures (see below) are part of the Sinai covenant. Thus, the covenant between God and the chosen people implies a certain treatment of the environment.

Individual laws can be and are read in this way, however, without reference to the covenantal context. The question, therefore, remains, how can the covenant behind these laws be related to environmental issues?

All three concepts of the covenant have their significance, but they are secondary in the context of the Old Testament. From the point of view of Christian ethics, and therefore also of theological environmental ethics, covenant theology as a specific reflection on the special relationship between God and man is essential. A typical feature of this approach is that "the Covenant is not static (...); what the Covenant is and what it means must be reinterpreted anew in each generation" (Kasper, 2001). Thus we find in the Torah several covenants or several theological interpretations of the same covenant: the creation and fall of man are followed by repeated offers of restoration through the covenant with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Ultimately, the prophet Jeremiah adds to this the promise of the New Covenant. This covenant dynamic is eloquently described by the Fourth Eucharistic prayer: "Time and again you offered them covenants and through the prophets taught them to look forward to salvation."

It is precisely such a theology of the covenant that can appropriately complement the theology of creation and thus deepen Christian environmental ethics. Firstly, it naturally integrates into itself the various aspects of God's redemptive action and thus captures the dynamics contained in the Old Testament. Furthermore, it provides a new impetus for practical reflection on the Christian attitude toward ecological challenges.

In the Torah, the covenant is the means of salvation, i.e., the restoration of a world distorted by sin. According to Genesis (Genesis 1), God created this world and made it good. Man, however, has corrupted God's work by disobeying the Creator. The result is not only punishment for man and woman, but also a curse on the earth (Genesis 3:17). God spared man's life, but the garments of skin (Genesis 3:21) suggest that animals paid for man's failure with their lives. This was, unfortunately, not the end of the human tragedy, and human sin abounded in the deeds of Cain, Lamech, and the wicked antediluvian generation. God chose, however, to remedy the consequences of human sin by covenant. This is not an atemporal cosmic covenant, but a concrete offer of relationship given repeatedly in human history. In what follows, we will look at the four major covenants in the pages of the Old Testament: Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the New Covenant. We will particularly look into the significance of these covenants for the whole of creation.

Although the covenant with Noah (Gen 9) is a retrojection of a later Israelite belief (McKenzie, 1993, p. 1297), it directly corresponds to the argument in the Compendium. Creation is concerned on several levels. In the opening commands

of Gen 9, humanity's relationship to creation changes: man is no longer called lord or steward of creation, but (perhaps as a result of sin) is a source of terror to other living creatures, which he receives as food (Genesis 9:2-3; Lintner, 2017, p. 50). The covenant itself, however, is formulated unilaterally, and so it would be more accurate here to translate the Hebrew term *berit* as "commitment" (cf. *The Jewish People* 37). This commitment is given to Noah as representative of the whole house and of all mankind since only his house remains after the flood. With him, all creation receives it (Genesis 9:9-10). God commits himself to preserving the cosmic order and expresses this through the cosmic sign of the rainbow, which symbolizes the laid-down weapon (the bow). Just as human failure led to the disruption of nature, so again God's promise to humanity guarantees that the natural order will not collapse.

If Christians take this commitment to God seriously and incorporate it into their spirituality, it can protect them from the danger of fatalism. If an environmental disaster presents itself as inevitable, one can respond in two ways: either be paralyzed by apocalyptic visions or consider the problem uncontrollable and direct one's attention and efforts elsewhere. The story of Noah assures Christians that God will not allow a fatal cosmic catastrophe. This does not at all mean, however, that humanity is not facing serious problems that need to be averted. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, trust in God gives man the peace to bear "fruit in charity for the life of the world" (Second Vatican Council, 1965, 16).

The covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15, 17) brings about the moment of election and calling. Like the previous covenant, it is a unilateral commitment, but it is accompanied by a call: that Abraham walk before God faithfully and be blameless (Genesis 17:1). The main difference is that the promises are made to Abraham and his seed – not to all the people, or even to all creation; yet the whole earth will benefit from these promises. The blessings God promises Abraham in Gen 17 are to be passed on to the whole earth (Genesis 12). Abraham is presented in the Bible primarily as a man of faith (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3.9; Galatians 3:6): he believed God, came out of his certainties, and therefore God blessed him with innumerable offspring, abundant livestock, and the Promised Land.

In the previous chapter, we demonstrated the importance of positive framing of pro-environmental behavior. Abraham can become a model for Christians for how trusting in God's help and stepping out of entrenched certainties leads to personal development. The green transition will be challenging in many aspects, but it is not the end of the world. Environmentally responsible ways of transport (public, shared, and land transport) bring new experiences. Vegetarian and organic food has positive health effects. Its restricted consumption helps to focus less on things and

more on people. The whole transition is often performed as a common project, thus strengthening social inclusion.

The covenant between God and Moses, together with the people of Israel, is the most fundamental covenant of the Old Testament. Yahweh promised to be the God of Israel and a dozen tribes agreed to serve only Yahweh, obey his Law, and avoid coalitions with other nations and their gods. According to the biblical narrative, this covenant was made on the mountain of Sinai (Ex 24) and subsequently renewed by Joshua (Joshua 24) and Josiah (2 Kings 23). Historically speaking, the beginnings of the very concept of the covenant may have originated during the time of Joshua. The land of Canaan was conquered by several Hebrew tribes, from which only some had undergone the experience of the Exodus. The covenant with Yahweh unified them (Mendenhall & Herion, 1991, p. 1185), in that their new state was not united politically or ethnically, but religiously (McKenzie, 1993, p. 1298).

We have seen in the previous chapter that ecological education must be accompanied by proper social attitudes in order to be effective. Egalitarian attitudes influence the results positively whereas hierarchical attitudes may lead to the complete opposite effect. Despite all the respect contained in the Old Testament for the hierarchical structure of ancient society, there are also many tendencies toward egalitarianism in it. The Sinai covenant has been made with the whole nation through Moses as a mediator, not with Moses as the king of the nation. The covenant also includes the gift of the Law. The provisions for the division of land are primarily to prevent the concentration of land in the hands of the oligarchy. Many of the other provisions call for consideration of the socially weak (e.g. Deuteronomy 24-25). The establishment of the kingdom is later seen as a concession (Judges 9). The nation of Israel is not a world power but a holy community, *qahal* in Hebrew. As is well known, the Septuagint translates this term as *ekklesia*, and hence the name for the Christian community, the church. If Kahan is right that scientific education needs to be accompanied by suspicion of commerce and industry, then the mosaic law provides a perfect example of suspicion against the concentration of political power and accumulation of wealth.

It would seem, thus far, that the motif of the covenant has mainly been a reassuring character. The people of Israel are granted the exclusive privilege of being God's special people (cf. *The Jewish People* 38). As Jeremiah reminds them, however, this election does not protect them automatically (Mendenhall & Herion, 1991, pp. 1190-1191), for they must fulfill God's will. Even the presence of the Lord's temple will not provide security if the inhabitants of Jerusalem do not keep God's commandments (Jeremiah 7:3-11). The blessings promised in the covenant at Sinai are accompanied by curses on those who break the provisions of the law, some of which concern other living creatures (Hiers, 1996, pp. 156-163). They prohibit animal cruelty and

disrespectful behavior, including bestiality (McNamee, 2015, p. 47). The Code of the Covenant alone (Exodus 20:22-2319) contains three laws protecting animals (Exodus 23:5,12,19), which are even granted the right to rest on the Sabbath by the Decalogue (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14). The prosperity of the chosen nation also depends on the observance of these provisions. For Christians, this means that if God is the ultimate guarantor of righteousness, this also applies to their treatment of other creatures. Even in theological environmental ethics, one must be wary of cheap grace (Jenkins, 232).

Finally, the last of the series of covenants is the so-called New Covenant. The difficulty of Israel was that she knew the conditions of the covenant, but always failed to fulfill her part. The prophet Jeremiah consequently announced the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34), which is not new in terms of its text, but in terms of the writing material. It will be written in men's hearts so that the Israelites will finally be able to fulfill it. "It is a description of the complete internalization of the divine will that makes unnecessary the entire machinery of external enforcement" (Mendenhall & Herion, 1991, p. 1192). A similar idea is expressed in the Book of Ezekiel with the promise of the new heart (Ezekiel 36:26–27; 11,19–20; cf. 16:60 – eternal covenant; 37,26 – the covenant of peace; cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001, 39).

This new heart is what we call today conversion, including ecological conversion (Pope Francis, 2015, pp. 216-221; Ormerod & Vanin, 2016, pp. 328-352). Ultimately, the solution to the environmental crisis depends on concrete decisions made by concrete people, whether politicians, managers or consumers. Part of the Christian faith is the hope that God will touch the hearts of these people and cause them to give priority to the common good and the good of creation.

## CONCLUSION

The theology of creation undoubtedly holds an irreplaceable position in Christian ecological discussion. However, it can be supplemented by other thought-provoking concepts, one of them being the covenant, which links together several environmentally relevant biblical topics scattered throughout the Bible. It connects a basic trust in the stability of the world order with a courageous attitude toward difficulties, a healthy critique of the concentration of power, and with the hope for the conversion of human hearts. Therefore, it offers a number of practical impulses for Christians concerned with environmental challenges.

There is an abundance of other profound biblical concepts which can enrich the discussion in a similar way, such as the message about reconciliation or about the kingdom of heaven. These concepts have yet to be addressed, though.

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# Očuvanje sigurnosti okoliša pod okriljem Saveza

**SAŽETAK**

Kad govorimo o biblijskim temeljima kršćanske ekološke etike, najčešće se naglašava teologija stvaranja. No, kompendij socijalnog nauka Crkve započinje s uvjerenjem temeljenim na iskustvu Knjige izlaska, i kaže da nam „ovaj (nam) odraz dozvoljava da s nadom gledamo u budućnost, podržani obećanjem i savezom kojeg Bog iznova obnavlja". Zalažem se za to da teologija saveza (ne samo s Noom) može i treba nadopuniti tradicionalne biblijske teme koje se koriste u ekološkoj raspravi. Motiv saveza ne povezuje samo različite biblijske tekstove relevantne za ekološku etiku, primjerice priča o Noi, Mojsijevi zakoni za zaštitu životinja, pravila vezana uz šabat, i proročanske vizije obnove, već nudi praktičnu inspiraciju za ekološki osviješteno ponašanje.

**Ključne riječi**: ekološka etika, kršćanska etika, Stari zavjet, Savez.