



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

### **Podcast Transcript: How Green is the Bible**

**Duration:** **0:14:07**

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Female 1: Welcome, this is a podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Interviewer: I'm talking to Professor David Horrell, Professor of New Testament Studies at Exeter University.

Professor Horrell, thanks very much for joining us today. Your AHRC funded project is looking at the place of the Bible in the history of human kind's relationship to the environment, to the earth, to its resources and so on.

On the face of it, it might seem that the Bible has played a highly compromised role in framing our relationship to our environment; I'm thinking of injunctions in Genesis for example that man should have dominion over the earth and so on. What's your take?

Respondent: Well indeed I think our take is that the Bible does indeed have a profoundly ambivalent impact upon and contribution to our sense of humanity's relationship to and responsibility towards our environment.

One of the interesting things about current debate is that a lot of debate between people who hold different positions is fought out in terms of biblical interpretation. There are those arguing if you like that the Bible really does have a green message and that our

interpretation of it otherwise has been flawed. Others who have more wanted to stress precisely the kind of point you made that maybe the Bible is more to blame than others might like in this kind of debate in terms of its creation of a hierarchy and placing humanity over the rest of nature and so on.

Interviewer: When did this idea take hold that somehow science was a solution to man's relationship to or a way forward for man in relationship to the earth? When did that idea take hold that we were scientific beings in a sense?

Respondent: Well a lot of the debate in relation to questions about humanity and the environment has taken its lead from a now classic and provocative article published in 1967 by a medieval historian Lyn White who in a sense made precisely the point you opened with, namely that the biblical creation stories and that divine mandate given to humanity to have dominion over the earth and to subdue it, that that in a sense played its part in constructing world view in which humanity had this vocation to regard nature as resources, as means for meeting human ends. But White's take in a sense was that it was only in the medieval period with certain technological developments and with certain developments in the history of science that that kind of biblical injunction joined up with what was coming to develop as western science and technology and then issued in this particular ideologically undergirded view of the human vocation further through science and technology and so on.

So a lot of the debate in biblical studies has in a sense been precisely about does the text of Genesis really say those things and can it be read differently and there are a lot among the greener wing of the churches and biblical interpreters and so on who would argue that this can be construed much more positively in terms of a role of stewardship.

But I think people have tended to agree that in one sense it is inaccurate to say that this is as it were what the text itself legitimates, it's way outside of the whole purview of the ancient biblical writers sense of what they were about, that it's part of the history of interpretation, it's that as those texts are read and reread and come to be read in a context of human optimism, optimism about what humanity can achieve in the world, the beginnings, the flourishing of science and technology and so on that the text begins to take on new meaning and legitimate new practices.

That's where in one sense what's going on now and the kind of arguments that are going on now are also profoundly contextual arguments in that the text is being reread in a context where we are perhaps a bit more humble about the potential for humans simply to transform the world into a wonderful in which we can all flourish. But also in which we are conscious of the way in which environmental issues press upon our consciousness and call for new ways of configuring that kind of tradition.

Interviewer: I would like to press you a little bit further on that and take a step back if I may as well. The question could be asked after all does it really matter what the Bible says about the environment. Some people may say for example we've got a serious practical problem on our hands, we've got environmental degradation, climate change, the Bible has helped unleash this problem but it's not part of the solution. What would you say to that?

Respondent: It's a very good question and a complicated question in many ways in the sense that one could respond to it very differently depending on what sort of location or particular audience one was thinking about.

One of the things we've tried to do in the approach we've taken in the project at Exeter is to see a dialogue between religion and science and a positive appreciation of what science is about rather than a hostile

rejection as the stance that is necessary, certainly for those who come at it from the religious ethical theological side. But I suppose the question could be answered in a number of ways, I will perhaps very briefly mention them and you can see where they go if you like.

One would be to say that to focus purely on the level of technology and science and so on ignores the extent to which what we see as the goals of technology, what science is there to try and do are informed by profound assumptions about our world view. If you like to use that term I used earlier, who are we, what are we here to do, what is important and what is our intrinsic value in relation to the things around you and we exist and so on. So there is the sense in which we need to ask those fundamental questions about world view as well and clearly the Bible is just one part but one part of influencing the Christian tradition sense of who we are and what we are here to do and so on.

I guess probably particularly in America one could also make the case that given the strength of the evangelical and fundamentalist churches over there and their impact on the political agenda and on the decisions that politicians take, what the Bible is deemed to be saying about humanity's status, role, vocation and so on is profoundly important. Indeed as one of our international visitors we had during the project looked particularly at the ongoing debates and changes in American fundamentalist and evangelical circles towards what is now described as something of a greening of fundamentalism, like a turning away from the sense that actually it's drill baby drill or whatever towards a sense that actually a stewardship of the resources of nature is more the stance which it is argued that the Bible should direct people.

I think that's a profoundly significant debate and one with political and ethical consequences.

Interviewer: You mentioned this earlier, but implicit to your project does seem to be a call for interpretive or hermeneutic sensitivity and care in reading the Bible. There is a lot at stake there not just in terms of fundamentalism but presumably just in general that would be an important approach that you would want to favour for any kind of reading, any kind of interpretation?

Respondent: Indeed and to that extent the project is focused on a particular and hugely important topic namely that of the environment and environmental ethics, our view of ecology and so on. But in one sense it is a kind of case study if you like of the way in which sacred texts, texts that are deemed to be authoritative are read and interpreted and are taken to direct human action. Certainly one of our key claims would be that we need to be reflective and candid about the extent to which we are active readers. I say we, anyone that's anyone who reads a text and takes something from it in that in the broadest sense and that it's not simply as different groups sometimes at least depict it as being, it's not simply of what the Bible says or it just teaches this. What are we construing it to mean and to what extent is that shaped by the context in which we find ourselves and the priorities we deem that context to press upon us.

Interviewer: You are just coming to the end of your AHRC funded project in a few days I understand. What are some of the other strands of your work? I know it's a multi stranded project isn't it?

Respondent: Yes, one of the things the project has been at its heart in a sense is one that's interdisciplinary within the areas that broadly comprise theology and biblical studies and so on. So my particular area is in biblical studies, one of the members of the project team is, or two members of the project team are scientists originally who have come

into theology and therefore particularly interested in that kind of dialogue.

Christopher Southgate for example, in one of the books he's published recently is particularly interested in the whole dialogue between evolutionary science and the Christian tradition again and the way that that's been informed by the Bible and the way in which that tradition can be made to think about the suffering of non human creatures. Human suffering has been a key issue in that whole tradition but the suffering that evolutionary processes are necessarily entailed has been one issue that he's trying to probe.

We've had a range of speakers come to address the project over the three years whose interests and expertise has ranged from those who are primarily in biblical studies, those who are interested in a way in which particular figures in the history of interpretation have read those creation stories from some of the early figures in the church through Martin Luther and Karl Bart, Thomas Aquinas, others.

So we've got a number of books coming out and I think yes, overall it tries to encourage a conversation between biblical studies, theologians, ethicists and so on to try and bring the biblical texts into the contemporary discussion about the environment.

Interviewer: You are also working with schools I understand as well, how fertile has that been as an area of your work?

Respondent: It's been very fertile and I think again precisely because of this need as we would perceive it certainly to I suppose help teachers and students to see the significance of engaging with some of these biblical texts and the way they have been read if they want to understand the ways in which in this case, the Christian tradition has construed and continues to construe humanity's relationship to the rest of the world, to the natural world, to creation, whatever you call it.

The most popular modules at A Level Religious Studies now and increasingly so in recent years are those dealing with philosophy and ethics or philosophy and religion and various ethical topics, and there are some modules looking at biblical texts, Gospels of Mark and John and so on. Those are taken by relatively small minority of students and one of the things we have been doing through some involvement with teachers conferences and so on and we would like to do more of is in a sense wanting to bring those biblical texts and their interpretation into the discussion of those philosophical and ethical issues. So if you want to talk about whether stewardship for example, that's one of the key topics that they learn about as a way of describing ethically the way humanity should relate to the environment, well that text I think you began our conversation by quoting from Genesis one about humanity having dominion over the earth, that text itself that the ways in which it has been interpreted and maybe misinterpreted and used to legitimate various kinds of practices and world views over the years ought to be part of that conversation.

So that's the kind of thing I speak in a bias way as a biblical scholar of course, but that's the kind of engagement we want to try and foster.

Interviewer: As I say you are coming to the end of your project, what next for your work?

Respondent: Well we are hoping to do some further work with schools and with school teachers perhaps taking those ideas further in terms of developing the sorts of resources that they might use. The kinds of publications that come out of the project itself have been primarily academic and geared to a scholarly and undergraduate audience, so it would be nice to feel that some of the complex and heavily footnoted arguments that we've been presenting and reviewing and critiquing in those sorts of publications might find a form in which they can be

engaged in classroom teaching and particularly engaged in the A Level syllabus on issues of environmental ethics and so on. So that's one key direction.

My colleague Christopher Southgate is involved in other projects which take further these questions about the dialogue between science and theology in terms of the origins of the universe and so on so plenty to do.

Interviewer: David Horrell, thank you very much.

Female 1: This podcast is accompanied by an article in the AHRC's latest podium magazine. It can be accessed by the publication section on the AHRC website.

That was a podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. For further information please go to [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk). Thank you for listening.

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