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*See also*: Bioregionalism; Bioregionalism and the North American Bioregional Congress; Blake, William; Buddhism; Daoism; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Ellul, Jacques; Gandhi, Mohandas; Griffin, Susan; Kropotkin, Peter; Left Biocentrism; Le Guin, Ursula; Radical Environmentalism; Reclus, Elisée; Snyder, Gary – and the Invention of Bioregional Spirituality and Politics; Social Ecology; Starhawk; Thoreau, Henry David.

## SP Anarcho-Primitivism and the Bible

"Anarcho-primitivism" (hereafter AP) is an important current of contemporary deep ecological thought which responds to contemporary environmental and social crises with a radical revisionism of the history of civilization. Though there have been few vigorous engagements between Christian theologians and these radical philosophical currents (exceptions include Jacques Ellul and Vernard Eller), this entry reflects upon possible points of contact between AP ideas and certain trajectories found in the Bible.

The trenchant AP critique of civilization finds surprising resonance in the Hebrew-Christian scriptures – if, that is, they are read as documents of Israelite resistance to Ancient Near Eastern empires from Egypt to Rome, rather than as a legitimating ideology for Christendom. The following eight "talking points" (appearing below in italics), representing salient aspects of the AP perspective as articulated by, for example, John Zerzan, are here correlated with minor and major biblical themes.

i) *Civilization represents for AP a pathological regression, rather than an ingenuous progression, of human consciousness.* Although mainstream theology has largely bought into the dominant evolutionary narrative of "Progress," the Bible's perspective on historical origins is quite contrary – which is perhaps why it has been increasingly marginalized since the Enlightenment. The "primeval history" of Gen. 1–11, for example, portrays civilization as the "fruit" not of human genius, but of alienation from the symbiotic lifeways of the "Garden." Its narrative of the "Fall" is one of hard labor, murder, violence and predatory urbanism, culminating in the symbol of Babel's tower as the zenith of human rebellion against God and nature. It can be read not only as a polemic against the Ancient Near Eastern empires that surrounded Israel, but also as an archetypal diagnosis of civilization-as-pathology. Throughout the rest of the biblical literature this strong strand of skepticism prevails, summarized perhaps best by Jesus' trope that "Solomon in all his glory" (an allusion to the Davidic Temple-State, the zenith of Israel's civilizational power) was less intrinsically valuable than a single wildflower (Lk. 12:27).

ii) *AP's perspective on "pre-history" argues that the late Neolithic domestication of plants and animals led to the domestication of human beings.* Agriculture inexorably gave rise to concentrated populations and increasingly centralized and hierarchical societies in built urban environments. These in turn developed into oppressive city-states, an aggressively colonizing civilization that exerted a powerful centripetal force upon the hinterlands. Thus agriculture is portrayed in Genesis not as a gift of the gods – as in other Ancient Near Eastern myths – but as a curse, the result of human rejection of the old symbiotic lifeways of the "Garden" (Gen. 3:17–19). While pastoralism is more sympathetically depicted in the biblical literature, we should keep in mind that during the period herders were socially marginalized fringe-dwellers.

From the Babel story on, the walled city and its architecture of domination is denounced regularly, as Ellul argues, including the Egyptian "store cities" built by Hebrew forced labor (Ex. 1:11–14) and the Canaanite fortress of Jericho (Josh. 6:26). And while much literature of the post-Davidic era romanticizes Jerusalem as the "city of God," the prophetic voice continued to call those who "weigh tribute and count towers" agents of terror – including Israelite rulers (Isa. 33:18; Ezek. 26:3–9; Zeph. 1:16; 3:6). This urban antipathy is best captured by the Psalmist's lament: "Truly I would flee to the wilderness . . . for I see violence and strife in the city . . . oppression and fraud on its streets" (Ps. 55:7, 9, 11). In the New Testament, John's vision of the New Jerusalem portends a radical "greening" of the city: gates always open and a river running down Main Street on whose banks grow Eden's Trees of Life (Rev. 21–22).

iii) *AP endorses revisionist anthropological studies that offer a more sympathetic assessment of hunter-gatherer social and economic organization, emphasizing what Marshall Sahlins called the "original affluence" of stone-age cultures.* Up until the last quarter-century, modern anthropologists tended to share Thomas Hobbes' bias that the lives of "uncivilized" humans were "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Since Sahlins, the consensus (as reflected in, for example, John Gowdy's collection) has shifted almost 180 degrees; hunter-gatherer cultures tend now to be portrayed as healthier, more leisurely, freer, more materially satisfied, less anxious and infinitely more ecologically sustainable than modern industrial ones. In particular, indigenous practices of subsistence and gift exchange are now being appreciated (particularly by Hyde) as a viable, if radically different, economic paradigm.

This encourages a reassessment of the economic cosmology of the Bible. For example, the story of the manna

in the wilderness instructs Israel (newly liberated from slavery in Egypt) about material sustenance as a divine gift (Ex. 16:4). The narrative stresses principles of "just gathering": only take what is needed, don't accumulate, and make sure each member of the community has enough – but not too much (16:16–25)! The Bible emphasizes providential natural abundance, community self-limitation and just sharing. Sabbath year programs of debt-release and wealth redistribution – most notably in the Levitical Jubilee (Lev. 25) – were a hedge against the intense stratification that characterized the slave- and tribute-based economies of ancient Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. The Gift cosmology is reiterated by the prophets: "Come, you who have no money, come buy and eat; come buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isa. 55:1). It also makes better sense of New Testament texts that have been anathema to capitalist religion, such as Jesus' teachings about giving up possessions (Lk. 12:13–34), the economic sharing in the Acts community (Acts 2:42ff.), and even Paul's practice of inter-church mutual aid (2 Cor. 8). These suggest that biblical writers may have been trying to rehabilitate the economic ethos of "pre-civilized" indigenous cultures as a better way.

iv) *For AP the ecological crisis necessitates a radical critique of advanced toolmaking and all forms of industrial technology, in the belief that when we use tools they use us back in a way that dehumanizes us and destroys our more natural competences.* The Bible, as an ancient text, has relatively little to say about "technology" *per se*, but two texts from the earliest strata of Torah are germane. One is the prohibition of domestic fires on the Sabbath (Ex. 35:3), thus circumscribing what clearly was the most ancient human tool. The other reflects a primal suspicion of tools as instruments of domination in relation to nature: "If you make an altar of stones for Me, do not construct it from hewn stone; if you use a tool on it you will defile it" (Ex. 20:25). Scripture has plenty to say about the danger of manufactured objects, particularly in the well-known prohibitions on image-making. But this taboo is more anti-fetishistic than anti-iconic, recognizing that "made objects" inevitably become mystified and sacralized, thus taking on more value than their makers (a classic statement is found in Isa. 43:9–20). This insight was later resurrected in Marx's theory of commodity fetishism in capitalism, as Guy Debord has shown. Moreover, James Kennedy has also argued that Israel's rejection of idols was a socioeconomic strategy of resistance to the public symbolism of tributary imperialism in Canaan (Ex. 32; Judg. 6; Deut. 4:19f.).

v) *Work for wages and hierarchical divisions of labor, the sine qua non of toxic civilization, are inherently alienating.* We have seen that agricultural labor is portrayed as antithetical to the divine will in the Fall story (Gen. 3:19). More generally, the Sabbath codes, which grounded in God's own Self-limiting character (Gen. 2:2f.), sought to constrain the compulsive-addictive potential of all work by circumscribing it. Keeping the Sabbath is the first (Ex. 16:23) and last (Ex. 35:1–3) commandment in the Covenant Code, regularly interrupting the rhythm of the Israel agricultural year by ritual "work stoppages" (Lev. 23). The Law and prophets relentlessly criticize how the rich exploit the labor of the poor (e.g., Lev. 19:13; Am. 5:11). Jesus spins stories that undermine the sanctity of wage-labor (Matt. 20:1–16), and that pit rebellious peasants against wealthy landowners (Mk. 12:1–10). He advocates the right of the hungry to steal food (Mk. 2:23ff.) and invokes the cosmology of divine gift: "Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap . . . yet God feeds them" (Lk. 12:24). Despite the captivity of modern Christian theology to the Protestant work ethic, the Bible's Sabbath ethos (including Paul's theology of grace) privileges being over doing, celebration over work, and gift over possession – again resonating with indigenous wisdom concerning personal, social and physical ecology.

vi) *For some AP theorists, symbolic representation (including language itself) lies at the heart of the "descent" into civilization, becoming a substitute for direct sensory experience of nature and engendering social differentiation.* While a radical critique of language finds no echo in the Bible (indeed, John speculates that "in the beginning was the Word," Jn. 1:1), the suspicion of "representation" does. Israel's covenant is sealed not only in the words of Torah, but also by the "witness" of a large stone under an oak tree (Josh. 24:27). It is idolatry (i.e., over-representationalism) that is the problem for biblical writers, not nature. Indeed the prophets recognize that even Israel's own cultic apparatus can become a vehicle of oppression (Amos 5:21–24; Jer. 7:9–14, a text that inspired Jesus' direct action in the Temple, Mk. 11:15:ff.).

Thus the story of early Israel is full of wild and often magical landscapes that directly reveal God (Ps. 104 and Job 38–41). These include remote deserts (Ex. 17:1) and spring-flooded streams (Josh. 3); lowlands springs (Gen. 26:19–22) and highlands caves (Gen. 19:30; Judg. 6:2; 1 Kgs. 19:9); singing forests and hills (Isa. 44:23; 55:12). YHWH appears under oak trees (Gen. 12:6f.; 18:1; Judg. 6:11; 1 Kgs. 19:4) and the divine voice is encountered in a burning bush (Ex. 3) and on a clouded mountain peak (Ex. 19; see Mk. 9:7). Heroes of the community are "born" in rivers (Ex. 2:3; see Mk. 1:9–11), buried under trees (Gen. 35:8; 1 Sam. 31:13) and walk on the sea (Mk. 4:35–41). Jacob's ecstatic vision of the *axis mundi* comes in desert wildlands, his head on a dreaming stone: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, the gate of heaven!" (Gen. 28:16–17). YHWH is imagined – but never imaged – as a roaring lion (Hos. 11:10), a nursing eagle (Deut. 32:11) and an angry mother bear (Hos. 13:8). As in all tribal societies, there are tales of dangerous adventures with wild animals, from Jonah's whale to Daniel's lions. And Israel's ritual life is in tune

with the seasons (Lev. 23) and the cycles of the moon (Ps. 81:3). Jesus prefers the solitude of the wilderness (Mk. 1:35), and invites his disciples to learn from seeds (Mk. 4), trees (13:28), birds (Lk. 12:24) and rain (Mt. 5:45). There are also some eschatological hints that primal, unmediated communion between God, nature and humans will one day be restored (Jer. 24:7; 31:33; Ezek. 36:26), which are intensified in John's metaphors of existential unity (Jn. 6:35); in Paul's notion of being "in Christ" (Rom. 8:35–39); and in the Temple-less New Jerusalem in which God dwells directly (Rev. 21:22).

vii) *AP advocates a variety of individual and group strategies of "going feral," both skirmishing with the dominant system and "re-inhabiting" natural spaces for their protection and our "detoxification."* Two distinctive features of biblical theology are worth noting here. One is the way in which YHWH inhabits the undomesticated spaces outside of civilization, and is encountered only by humans who journey into the wilderness. This becomes the master metaphor of liberation in the Exodus story, and continues in the life of the prophets who go "feral" such as Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:3ff.), John the Baptist (Lk. 3) and Jesus, who begins his ministry with a wilderness "vision-quest" (Matt. 4:1–11). The writer of Hebrews invites believers to solidarity with Christ "outside the gates" of civilization (Heb. 13:12f.), and calls to mind the heroes of the faith who resisted empire by going feral, "wandering in deserts and mountains and living in caves" (Heb. 11:38). The Church is portrayed fleeing the imperial Beast into the desert in John's Apocalypse (Rev. 12:6).

The other feature is the way nature is portrayed in "opposition" to imperial civilization. Egypt buckles under a siege of natural disasters (the "plagues" of Ex. 7–10). Prophetic oracles denounce the logging practices of Assyria (1 Kgs. 19:20ff.) and the river-polluting cattle ranches of Pharaoh (Ezek. 32:13f.), and long for the day when wild animals will re-inhabit the spaces that city-states have colonized (Isa. 13:19–22; 34:8–15; Ezek. 31): "I will give you as food to the wild birds and animals" (Ezek. 39:4). There is a fascinating story of people returning (if incompetently) to older food-gathering ways during famine (2 Kgs. 4:38–44), a parable of divine abundance vs. imperial scarcity that Jesus re-enacts in his wilderness feedings (Mk. 6:35ff.). And the apostle Paul – who did his own time in the desert (Gal. 3:17) – calls for radical non-conformity to the dominant cultural codes of Roman civilization (Rom 12:1–2).

viii) *The goal of AP is not to "go back to the Neolithic," which is recognized to be impossible, but rather to (re)discover "future primitivity."* The Bible agrees that since the Fall the natural world has been increasingly wrenched out of balance by the violence and greed of civilization. It proposes Torah as a code of alternative communal practices having to do with self-limitation. In it we find several interesting attempts to constrain ecocidal tendencies, such as the taboo against eating both mother and young game birds (Deut. 22:6) and the remarkable prohibition on destroying nature during war: "Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?" (Deut. 20:19–20). The gospels seem to call for the re-opening of older ways (Mk. 1:2), and Jesus is called the archetypal "Human One" (Mk. 2:28) and the "eschatological Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45). Stories of his healing power suggest an ancient capacity renewed, not just for "shamans" but for all disciples (Mk. 6:12; Acts 3:1ff.). His oppositional stance led the representatives of civilization in Roman Palestine to execute Jesus as a heretic/dissident. The NT thus speaks candidly of the "cost of discipleship" and of faith as "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see; this is what the ancients were commended for" (Heb. 11:1). The same divine power that created the world is believed able to renew it, and biblical eschatalogy envisions the restoration of "original peacableness" (Isa. 11:6–9), insisting that a "new heaven and Earth" will ultimately eclipse the dreary reality of empire. This alternative consciousness is not escapist fantasy; it empowers practices of both renewal and resistance (2 Cor. 10:4; Eph. 6:10ff.). As Paul puts it, nature is groaning under its state of captivity, awaiting humans who will cooperate with the divine plan for the liberation of every living thing (Rom. 8:20f.).

Admittedly, few of the interpretations sketched above have been advanced by the theologies of Christendom, nor by contemporary mainstream biblical scholarship – quite the contrary. And there are, to be sure, certain strands of biblical literature that celebrate Israel-as-civilization, which have been used to promote everything AP deplores. But while the Judeo-Christian scriptures may not agree with all AP perspectives, what is surprising is to discover the degree of resonance. As is always the case, new questions open up new hermeneutical vistas. The above suggests that a conversation between biblical theology and radical green anarchism is not only possible, but also key to our exploration of the intersection between religion and nature.

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