

Stewardship of the Wetlands below the Golan Heights: A Study in Judeo-Christian and Muslim Contrasts

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I ask the reader's indulgence as I weave personal narrative into my essay, for my thinking has emerged in these past years through a range of travels, events, and assignments, from which I'll draw in making my case.

On my first visit to Mount Hermon on Israel's northern border, our tour guide pointed out the agricultural plenty of a valley just north of the Sea of Galilee, noting that it had been a malarial swamp for centuries under Ottoman Rule. I'd been reading Dan Senor's book on the entrepreneurial genius of Israel, *Start-Up Nation*,¹ and his examples meshed nicely with what I was seeing in the Hula (Huleh, Hule) Valley. Here was yet another testimony to the engineering acumen and energy of the Jews who had returned to their ancient land in the 20th century.

On this particular trip, in a group hosted by the Israeli Defense Forces, I was gathering material for a *Kairos Journal* booklet contrasting Israel with its neighbors in a number of connections.² Though our guide made only brief reference to the Hula as we skirted it in our approach to the heights of Golan, my recent teaching assignments in environmental ethics brought it to the fore in my thinking, for here was a signal case of “making the desert bloom”—or making the bog fructify.

THE HULA VALLEY, PAST AND PRESENT

Back stateside, I was able to visit the Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, which offered choice material on this particular piece of land. Of course, the history of the region extends well back into Bible times,³ and things were not always so grim:

In Roman times, the region flourished, and ... became a center of settlement where red rice and cotton were grown. But later, the area sank back into oblivion during the long centuries of Arab and Turkish rule. When Jewish pioneers first entered the region, which until then, was owned by absentee landlords, they faced the opposition of the Turkish authorities, its few impoverished Arab inhabitants, and later, the restrictions of the Mandatory regime.⁴

Besides some natural obstructions, the region had been bedeviled by a bridge built in 1260 AD, one whose supports were so extensive that they constricted the headwaters of the Jordan, a condition that continued under Arab and Turkish rule for nearly seven centuries.⁵ Though there were suggestions and attempts to ameliorate conditions in the 1800s, nothing was done until the 1950s. Thus, one 1937 visitor could write,

Our boat glides into the mouth of the Jordan, but one really cannot tell where the Jordan ends and dry land begins. On its two banks, as far as the eye can see, stretches a sea of reeds and ... the ancient papyrus – its stalks partly under water. Swamp, swamp, swamp everywhere. After the winter rains not a spot remains on which to put one's foot. The thicket is alive with birds. Storks hop about from place to place. Tiny flies, practically invisible, get into our eyes and nostrils, and cover our clothes with a black layer.⁶

The landscape may have been idyllic, but the threat of disease was an ever present:

The Russian Jews who came to this beautiful spot, with its green foliage and abundant water, thought that they had arrived in another Paradise. But soon, the enemy showed himself, an enemy far more dangerous than the primitive Beduin, who terrorized the whole region. It was the tiny mosquito that breeds in the Hule. Fever in all its forms—malaria, yellow fever, tropical fever, black fever—attacked the settlement.⁷

Two decades later, in 1958, a seven-year reclamation project finally made the valley usable to farmers. Thus transformed, it proved critical to the fledgling nation's survival and development, yielding over 12,000 acres of new farmland (approximately 19 square miles) and saving over eight billion gallons of water per year, water being lost previously to evaporation.

Granted, "Marsh Arabs"⁸ had come to terms with the site, but Zionists believed that they could improve on what they had found:

On either side of the swamp and lake are scattered the villages of the ... Arabs who support themselves on the papyrus, of which they make their huts and weave the mats for sale. Herds of buffalo are grazing in the distance. When the papyrus jungle is cut down, the Hula will probably become less "interesting," but as against this, the swamp lands will become the home, not of a few hundred malaria infected Beduin, but of thousands of Jewish settlers.⁹

So Jewish engineers went to work with giant excavating machines and dynamite to fulfill dream of "draining the swamp" (reminiscent of Faust's program of redemption):

The reclamation of the Huleh marshes is being brought about by a simple device. By helping the river itself to find easy passage through the area, the swamp waters are being drained and inundated land restored to fertility. The riverbed is being deepened and widened, the basalt rock stemming its flow has been blasted and removed, and drainage canals have been built, which will bear winter's burden of floods.¹⁰

This was part of a broader plan to make the most of Israel's territory, under the rubric, "Conquest of the Wilderness."

This slogan has expressed the spirit of Zionist effort in Eretz Israel from the earliest days. In most cases, this meant restoring to the land its former fruitfulness, making good errors committed by man in his ignorance when he robbed the land of its natural wealth or exposed it to the destructive forces of nature. Thus the Keren Kayemeth forests were planted to replace trees cut down by Arabs or Turks or grazed away by the herds of the Beduin. And thus we are rebuilding terraces on the hillsides, and draining the swamps of the Emeq Jezreel and the Beisan valleys which had developed in the course of a thousand years or more.¹¹

The Israelis built on what had gone before, but with new technology:

The Huleh Arabs used [papyrus] to make walls for their reed huts and marketed fine reed mats all over the country. Jewish settlers built an amphibious machine to reap the papyrus which is once again used today for the manufacture of reed mats. The inhabitants of Ma'abarat Kiryat Shemona are engaged in this and are also using papyrus as raw material for boxes, boards, etc.¹²

As intent as they were to transform the valley, there was, early on, a widespread desire to preserve elements of the wild:

Alongside the papyrus, there are other subtropical swamp-plants: beautiful white and yellow water-lilies (nymphaeas and nuphars) crowfeet and swamp-ferns. It is intended to keep a reservation area of about two thousand dunams of the swamp area after completing the drainage where the unique flora and fauna of the place may be studied.¹³

This concern was soon translated into national policy:

In the Huleh marshlands rare species of plants are to be found. The thick, tangled growth of papyrus provides a breeding ground for uncommon types of animal life. Countless varieties of rare birds and waterfowl have lived here for centuries. The Huleh marsh is also a transit station for numerous birds in their seasonal

migration from Europe to the tropical climate of Africa. If the marshlands were completely drained, this centre of natural life would be destroyed. Thus the Jewish National Fund in response to the request of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel has decided to create a "Nature and Wildlife Reserve" within the marshland and Lake, covering an area of about 4000 dunams. To maintain the water in this natural reserve at a higher level than in other areas, dikes must be built around the greater part ... Dikes were constructed this winter but it will not be possible to complete them until water has been drained off from Lake Huleh and its water level lowered correspondingly.¹⁴

Furthermore, environmentalists had more than the migratory and residential birds in mind, for they had gone to school on the history of wildfires:

Since there is about 50,000,000 cub.m. of peat here, it is conceivable that its exploitation may take decades. Therefore during this period, care must be taken that the peat does not dry up completely, as dehydration is liable to alter its physical composition and deprive it of most of the properties which render it useful as fertilizer. Further, there is the danger that fire may break out, as has been the case in other countries, where peat fields have continued to burn for many years. The fire gradually consumes the layers of the peat underground, and the only indication of this is provided by the smoke rising from the fields. Thus to prevent a similar occurrence in the peat deposits of the Huleh marshlands, the water level must not be allowed to draw beyond a certain depth. To achieve this purpose, which is apparently in conflict with the drainage scheme, special structures to regulate the water level of the main drainage canals will be erected. In addition, within this area, a special network of canals will be created through which the amount of water required to keep the peat moist will flow.¹⁵

Of course, not everyone was happy with the changes. One longtime resident remembers fondly the habitation of his youth.

When we were young, we loved to wander barefoot along its shores, through the damp weeds, across the slick mud flats of our small lake—Lake Huleh in the Galilee. Sometimes, when it was very hot, grass that was always green, we would stretch out on the grass and bury our faces in its cool freshness ... And on moonlit summer nights we would fling off our clothes and stride farther and farther away

from the shore through the shallow water on a broad, silvering pathway, our bodies a misty whiteness, as through we were beings from some other world.

We saw the lake is part of the First Creation, and we pledged ourselves to it unconditionally, loving it in its placid moments, in its storm hours, always.¹⁶

When the machinery arrived, it was a shock to his system:

It [a giant dredging machine] dug its teeth in and with snail-like pace, step by step, day by day, made its way through the tangle human eyes had never viewed, on which the sun had never shone. The mounds of earth grew, were mixed with water and carried off in pipes. Startled birds left their homes and went forth to seek new ones. Their dwellings were destroyed. Puddles beside the newly-dug trench drained into it, leaving behind them mournful patches of bareness, hinting of what was to come, the unbelievable.¹⁷

Still, as sad as he was to note the change, he recognized that new life had come to Hula:

But after a time—even with startling quickness—a new kind of green covered the new land. Sugar cane and cotton sprang up in the fields which once had once been hunting-grounds for fishermen, as they had grown there since the beginning of the world.¹⁸

The results are dramatically obvious to Southern Seminary tour groups to the Holy Land. The Hula National Park¹⁹ is a regular stop, where students negotiate raised walkways through the wetlands, observing water buffalo, catfish, birds and such, some wildlife seen from a special blind favored by artists and photographers. The students also enjoy a “sensurround” video, where they find themselves flying with geese, their seats lurching as their faces are sprayed with mist from the cinematic clouds they enter. They see footage of European flocks landing for respite on their long journey to Africa and back. But back on board the buses for the ride up toward Caesarea Philippi, they witness miles of row crops and orchards not possible before the dawn of Israeli statehood in 1948.

COUNTERPART PROJECTS IN THE NEGEV

Taking us “from Dan to Beersheba,” *Start-Up Nation* provides a range of examples to demonstrate that the Hula Valley project is not a lonely instance of Israeli stewardship:

Looking at Israel today, most visitors would be surprised to discover that 95% of the country is categorized as semi arid, arid, or hyperarid, as quantified by levels of annual rainfall. Indeed by the time Israel was founded, the Negev Desert had crept up almost all the way north to the road between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Negev is still Israel’s largest region, but its encroachment has been reversed as its northern reaches are now covered with agricultural fields and planted forests. Much of this was accomplished by innovative water policies since the days of Hatzerim. Israel now leads the world in recycling waste water; over percent is recycled, which is three times the percentage recycled in Spain, the country in second place.

Kibbutz Mashabbe Sade, in the Negev desert, went even further: the kibbutzniks found a way to use water deemed useless not once, but twice. They dug a well as deep as ten football fields are long—almost half a mile—only to discover water that was warm and salty. This did not seem like a great find until they consulted professor Samuel Applebaum of nearby Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. He realized that the water would be perfect for raising warm-water fish.

It was not simple to convince people that growing fish in the desert makes sense,” said Applebaum, a fish biologist. “But it’s important to debunk the idea that arid land is infertile, useless land.” The kibbutzniks started pumping the ninety-eight-degree water into ponds, which were stocked with tilapia, barramundi, sea bass, and striped bass for commercial production. After use in the fish ponds, water, which now contained waste products that make excellent fertilizer, was then used to irrigate olive and date trees. The kibbutz also found ways to grow vegetables and fruits that were watered directly from the underground aquifer.²⁰

In this connection, on our most recent Southern Seminary trip to Israel, we stayed on a kibbutz in the Negev, surrounded by crops, including flowers cultivated under acres of plastic tentage. With the dawn came the sound

of Filipino and Thai farmers driving tractors to the fields. And departing the kibbutz, we passed the Arava Research Center,²¹ to which many from around the world, including Palestinians, come to study desert agriculture.²²

Reforestation has also proceeded apace:

A century ago Israel was, as Mark Twain and other travelers described it, largely a barren wasteland. Now there are an estimated 240 million trees, millions of them planted one at a time. Forests have been planted all over the country, but the largest is perhaps the most improbable of all: the Yatir Forest.

In 1932, Josef Weitz became the top forestry official in the Jewish National Fund, a pre-state organization dedicated to buying land and planting trees in what was to become the Jewish state. It took Weitz more than thirty years to convince his own organization and the government to start planting forests on hills at the edge of the Negev Desert. Most thought it couldn't be done. Now there are about four million trees there. Satellite pictures show the forest sticking out like a visual typo, surrounded by desert and drylands in the place where it should not exist.²³

This forest grows on rainwater alone, about eleven inches a year, roughly one third that of Dallas, and it absorbs nearly as much carbon dioxide as temperate zone forests. In 2008, the UN sponsored a conference in the region, one where experts from forty countries came to see "why Israel is the only country whose desert is receding."

BIBLICAL BASES FOR ENVIRONMENTALISM

The biblical warrant for this sort of care in the Hula and Negev is plentiful. A typical Christian book on environmentalism lists scores of texts touching on the issue: Steven Bouma-Prediger's *For the Beauty of the Earth*,²⁴ draws from 75 different chapters of the Bible, with a 54/21 distribution between Old and New Testaments; Noah Toly and Daniel Block in *Keeping God's Earth*²⁵ feature material from 407 chapters with a 343/64 split.

Of course, eisegesis runs rampant among doctrinaire environmentalists, but there is sufficient exegesis to warrant serious "creation care." David Rhoads's collection of "classic sermons on saving the planet," *Earth and Word*,²⁶ features both: We may well roll our eyes as "activist for peace and

justice” Ched Myers’s declares Isaiah 14:16 “an extraordinary hymn to environmental justice” and Diane Bergant sees in Job 42:3 illumination of “the profound human struggle between human-centered interests and cosmos-centered realities”; but we may find some merit in Barbara Brown Taylor’s commentary on Leviticus 25:4 (sabbatical rest for the land), with its historical connection to Rogation Day. It’s a mixed bag, but a very full one.

Since our focus is Israel, let’s focus on their scripture, which is, of course, our scripture as well. Though the nation today is quite secular in many ways, the text is, nevertheless, ever before them, even in the military. For instance, on our IDF trip, we found a watchman-on-the-wall passage from Isaiah (62:6) posted at an air base sending drones over Gaza. And at the Western/Wailing Wall, we watched as copies of the Tanakh were slipped into the shirts of newly commissioned paratroopers, even as they were given their rifles. The nation of Israel may well be a “cut-flower” civilization in Judeo-Christian terms, but there is bloom yet on its petals.

Of course, Genesis 1:28 is a key text:

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth. (HCSB)

This passage irritates secular environmentalists, for it gives man dominion over the earth and thus commits the ultimate *faux pas* of “anthropocentrism.” For instance, Lynn White, in his famous and absurd essay, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,”²⁷ faults environmental icon, Francis of Assisi, for failing to “substitute the idea of the equality for all creatures, including man, for the idea of man’s limitless rule of creation.”²⁸ By White’s light, we can blame the Bible for a world reflective of the line in Joni Mitchell’s 1970s song, *Big Yellow Taxi*—“They paved paradise, and they put up a parking lot.”

Of course, there have been many abuses of nature, but it is doubtful that callous developers and polluters have found inspiration in a bad reading of Genesis 1:26. More likely, they have simply been playing out their fallen nature, explained in Genesis 3. And had they read Genesis 2:15, they would have understood their need to care as well as to exploit: “The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden to work it and watch over it.”

Commenting on this Genesis passage, John Calvin wrote,

[T]he custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition, that being content with a frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain. Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence; but let him endeavour to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. Let him so feed on its fruits, that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits to be marred or ruined by neglect. Moreover, that this economy, and this diligence, with respect to those good things which God has given us to enjoy, may flourish among us; let every one regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved.²⁹

We should also note Deuteronomy 20:19-20, which speaks of the environmentally sensitive conduct of war:

When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can get food from them. You must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human, to come under siege by you? But you may destroy the trees that you know do not produce food. You may cut them down to build siege works against the city that is waging war against you, until it falls.

And one need not be at war to have ecological responsibilities, as we see in Deuteronomy 22:6-7:

If you come across a bird's nest with chicks or eggs, either in a tree or on the ground along the road, and the mother is sitting on the chicks or eggs, you must not take the mother along with the young. You may take the young for yourself, but be sure to let the mother go free, so that you may prosper and live long.

These two passages in Genesis and Deuteronomy are reflected in the Israeli treatment of the Hula Valley, with its agricultural makeover as well as its establishment of a state park, with its sensitivity to flora and fauna alike. Both concerns are grounded in the Jews' spiritual heritage. And that legacy has extended through the centuries of Christian writing on the environment,

influencing, among many others, Francis Schaeffer and Annie Dillard of our era.

In the West, this ecological theme has found expression in a variety of gratifying ways:³⁰ Preservation, as with the U.S. National Park system, which began with Yellowstone in 1882; Restoration, as in the renewal of tall-grass prairie on the 455 acres inside the nuclear accelerator ring at Fermilab in Batavia, Illinois; Invention, as with British Columbia's Butchart Gardens; and Conservation, as in the foundation of Ducks Unlimited. All have their place, but conservation has enjoyed rightful primacy, since the overarching concern has not been the worship or "inviolability" of nature, but the wise stewardship of resources.

KORANIC BASES FOR ENVIRONMENTALISM

Though Muslims have always been keen to preserve the life-giving oases, wells, and pastures of their perilous desert neighborhoods, they have come late to the broader environmental cause. In his book *Earth in the Balance*, Al Gore devotes just 13 lines to Islamic environmentalism, fewer than he devotes to the Baha'is and just a line more than he devotes to the Sikhs.³¹ But new literature is emerging,³² though the exegesis is often strained.

Fazlun M. Khalid (for decades, a member of the UN's Commission on Racial Equality), admits the problem: "The truth was that when I began my work on Islam and the environment in the mid-1980s, I had found it nigh impossible to unearth any Muslim with an expressed interest in this subject."³³ He blames this on the way that "tradition and the wisdom of the ages" had been spurned and replaced by "modernity," and then observes, "This did not look like the way Muslims would want to run the world."³⁴

Thus, he recounts ruefully that "those looking to reverse the human assault on the natural world from a specifically Islamic stand point were a precious unknown rarity, if only I could find them."³⁵ To his dismay, his "initial search produced contrary results, with one 'Islam scholar' dismissing any interest in the environment as 'nature worship' and another disclaiming any responsibility whatsoever on the grounds that 'this was not our problem ... [the West] 'created the problem so let them solve it.'"³⁶

He concludes, "The uncomfortable truth was that Muslims were mostly if not wholly seduced into the worship of modernity, and were thus part of the problem."³⁷ Along the way, he also lays blame at the feet of *riba* or usury,³⁸

the purview of big banks who fund “big dams and other unnecessary, environmentally destructive projects.”

He decided to take up environmental studies in 1990 at the age of 58, and therein, he “discovered ... that Islam was inherently environmental in scope, and that it was a belief and value system deeply embedded in the natural order.” He learned that “Allah described His creation as His *ayat* (literally ‘miraculous sign’).”³⁹

Khalid went on to found an Islamic “eco-community” in a rural setting. Its “raison d’être was the increasingly alienating influences of urban life and a pent-up desire to escape this.” It produced the World Islamic Foundation for the Environment—WIFE—“which did not go down well in certain quarters.” Then the Islam Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences—IREES—emerged, and it “appeared to express our aspirations with reasonable accuracy.”⁴⁰

He unpacks the notion of *mu-amalat*, “acting in the public interest,” with implications for the natural world. From the verse, “We did not create the heavens and earth and everything between them, except with truth” (15:85), he surmises, “The Qur’an asks us to be just to our natural surroundings.”⁴¹ He preaches moderation from the Koranic text, 6:141:

It is He who produces gardens, both cultivated and wild, and palm-trees and crops of diverse kinds and olives and pomegranates both similar and dissimilar. Eat of their fruits when they bear fruit and pay their dues on the day of their harvest, and do not be profligate. He does not love the profligate.

And when he holds environmental workshops, he teaches attendees four principles: *Tawhid*, The Unity Principle (unity of creator and creation); *Fitra*, The Creation Principle (humanity arising from bosom of natural world); *Mizan*, The Balance Principle (dynamic balance [in “the just weight” verse!]); *Khalifa*, The Responsibility Principle (for the guardian; cf. ‘khalifs’).⁴²

Another Muslim voice, Mawil Y. Izzi Deen, teaches at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. He serves as consultant to the Saudi Arabian Center for Science and Technology and has co-authored *Islamic Principles for the Conservation of the National Environment*, wherein he writes,

In Islam, the conservation of the environment is based on the principle that all the individual components of the environment were created by God, and that all

living things were created with different functions, functions carefully measured and meticulously balanced by the Almighty Creator. Although the various components of the natural environment serve humanity as one of their functions, this does not imply that human use is the sole reason for their creation.⁴³

He then summarizes the teaching of the Koran with “ethical and legal reasons for protecting the environment:” 1. The environment is God’s; 2. Nature offers him continuous praise; 3. He set up natural laws; 4. Humans are not the only creatures worthy of respect and care; 5. Kindness is due to animals; 6. The balance of the universe must be preserved; 7. God created the universe for all; 8. Only humans have task of protecting the environment.⁴⁴

In the Koran, he draws on Surah 33:72 to explain man’s duty of stewardship: “Lo! We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it.”⁴⁵ (So, humanity got the job it by default.) He also cites, reasonably, Surah 11:61 (“He brought you forth from the earth and hath made you husband it”) and Surah 2:205 (“And when he turns away [from] thee his effort in the land is to make mischief therein and to destroy the crops and the cattle; and Allah loveth not mischief”). From the hadiths, he notes, “Some trees are as blessed as the Muslim himself, especially palm,” and “When doomsday comes if someone has a palm shoot in his hand he should plant it.”⁴⁶

He speaks also the concept of *hima* (protection of certain zones), a notion which “has existed since the time of the Prophet Muhammad,” and of the *harim*, such as “wells, natural springs, underground water channels, rivers and trees planted on barren land.” These are “inviolable zones[s] which may not be used or developed, save with the specific permission of the state.”⁴⁷

So yes, there is Islamic scriptural warrant for ecological circumspection. But theirs has been concern more for the oasis than the world at large, a concern reflected beautifully in architecture. I think of my visit to the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain, with its ornate decoration, shaded passageways, high ceilings, pools, and fountains. It was paradisiacal.

DEEPER ISSUES: “THE SHEIK’S DILEMMA” AND FATALISM

But how, then, does one explain the difference between Muslim and Jewish treatment of the Hula? Though some Islamic scripture is, indeed, agriculturally

and ecologically sensitive, other Islamic scripture has proven adept at strangling the baby in the crib. For the Muslim world has been in no position to develop and marshal the technology characteristic of the Judeo-Christian West. For one thing, they have faced the “Sheik’s dilemma,” an expression coined by British journalist Chris Davison, echoing political scientist Samuel Huntington’s earlier talk of the “king’s dilemma.”

The problem is that the leaders are threatened by “free expression, tolerance of experimentation and failure, and access to basic government economic data,” each of which is “necessary for culture in which entrepreneurs and inventors contrive.” This bodes well for Israelis, but not for their Muslim neighbors, for “entrepreneurship helps economies grow and societies progress—it rewards merit, initiative, and results rather than status.” Since “liberalization challenges the monarch’s power in the Arab world,”⁴⁸ cultures are primitivized, and the best intentions are hard pressed to translate themselves into progress.

More fundamentally, the Islamic view of God is a poor fit with pure research and technological development. Baylor sociologist, Rodney Stark observes:

Allah is not presented as a lawful creator but is conceived of as an extremely active God who intrudes on the world as he deems it appropriate. This promoted the formation of a major theological bloc within Islam that condemns all efforts to formulate natural laws as blasphemy in that they deny Allah’s freedom to act. Thus, Islam did not fully embrace the notion that the universe ran along on fundamental principles laid down by God at the creation but assumed that the world was sustained by his will on a continuing basis. This was justified by the statement in the Qur’an that “verily, God will cause to err whom he pleaseth, and will direct whom he pleaseth.” Although the line refers to God’s determination of the fate of individuals, it was interpreted broadly to apply to all things.⁴⁹

In his Cairo address, delivered not long into his presidency, Barak Obama sang the glories of Islam, with its purported advances in medicine, mathematics, and such. But the historical record is not so rosy. Indeed, one can find alarmed Muslims asking, in print, why only a handful of their brothers out of a billion have belonged to Nobel Prize winning teams, while hundreds of Jews out of a dozen or so million have been laureates.⁵⁰ Something has

truly gone wrong, and it was reflected in the Hula Valley, where Muslims acquiesced to the circumstances, they themselves “subdued” and “dominated” by what they faced.

THE VIENNA AND TEL AVIV CASES

In 2008, a number of us gathered in Vienna to discuss the simultaneous decline of Christianity in Europe and the growth of the Islamic community within its borders. Among the hundred or so attendees were parliamentarians and journalists from several European nations, American ethicists and theologians, and church leaders from yet other continents. Three who have taught at Southern Seminary, Drs. Ben Mitchell, Greg Thornbury, and myself, served on a panel with a British Arabic scholar and an Italian government minister. We argued before a largely secular crowd that you cannot build or preserve Europe on either atheism or Islam, but only upon a Judeo-Christian base.

In making our case, we surveyed the cultural fruit of our theological tree (now, in booklet form, and available online as *Legatees of a Great Inheritance*).⁵¹ Among the benefits were constitutionalism, limited government, universal human dignity and rights, gender and racial equality, the notion of vocation, remuneration for labor, property rights, the growth of science, world-class hospitals and universities, freedom of conscience and expression, charities and humanitarian aid, the just war tradition, and great flowering in the arts. For the secularists who heard us skeptically, we observed that such idols as Friedrich Nietzsche, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Bertrand Russell were not the sort to establish orphanages or the Special Olympics.

On the plane back to the USA, I had occasion to talk with Nonie Darwish, a program participant, who started life as the daughter of an Egyptian intelligence officer. When she was a girl, her father ran terrorist raids out of Gaza, and one evening, an Israeli commando team visited her home to do him in. Not finding him there, they departed immediately, leaving the family unscathed, though her father’s own teams had scathed many innocents in Israel. She never forgot this kindness, and ultimately formed the group, Arabs for Israel.

In her book, *Now They Call Me Infidel*,⁵² she also speaks of the socially debilitating effects of polygamy, illegal but common in Egypt. When Israeli’s finally eliminated her father, her widowed mother returned to Egypt as

something of a celebrity, a “martyr’s wife.” Nevertheless, life was difficult in that she could scarcely make friends with married women, for they feared that their husbands might take a fancy to her and seek to wed her as well. The grief and competition generated by polygamy, common in the Muslim world, poisons families, and makes it all the more difficult to raise healthy minded children, a nation’s most precious resource.

The problems for Middle Eastern Islam go on and on to include a “shame and honor” culture rather than a “guilt and blame” Western perspective. It fosters nepotistic tribalism and vicious treatment of those who embarrass the family or “The Prophet.” On my first visit to Amman, I was surprised to read in the paper what the queen of Jordan had chosen for her special cause. While American first ladies champion highway beautification (Lady Bird Johnson), freedom from drugs (Nancy Reagan), literacy and reading (Barbara and Laura Bush), and physical fitness (Michelle Obama), Queen Noor addressed the practice of honor killing, which was filling the jails with young women in protective custody, safeguarded from murderous relatives distraught over such transgressions as kissing an infidel or refusing an arranged marriage. A culture beset with those who think this admirable is ill-disposed toward greatness.

Several years after the Vienna conference and after IDF tour, the Kairos team produced another booklet, this one addressing the contrasting achievements of the Jews, *Israel and Legitimacy*.⁵³ Therein, we spoke of the Arab world’s deficit in democracy, press freedom, the stewardship of resources, globally beneficial ingenuity, dignity for women, “purity of arms,” and safety for the Jews. Thus crippled, they can only watch and envy the flourishing they find in their tiny neighbor.

THE BUCHAREST DISCLAIMER

Of course, not every Christian tradition is equally adept at encouraging intellectual growth. For instance, the Orthodox lands have failed to distinguish themselves in science and technology. While there may be “Catholic” Fiats, “Lutheran” Volvos, and “Anglican” Jaguars, one looks in vain for an Orthodox car of international acclaim, unless one counts the Yugo or Lada, whose production was overseen by Communist regimes and whose marketing prowess was never enviable.

A Southern Baptist team made this case to the new Romanian leadership not long after the fall of Ceaucescu. Flush with new freedom, the Orthodox Church was reasserting its power, making life difficult for Catholics and Evangelicals. Along with other erstwhile Southern professors, Richard Land and Phil Roberts, I was able to join in meetings with government officials to argue that something like our First Amendment was important not only to freedom of conscience and human decency, but also to the flourishing of the nation, including its economic and scientific fortunes. Otherwise, there might never be a Romanian car, airplane, or medical research institute.

Nevertheless, “Christendom” has led the way in social flourishing, a message not lost on such Middle Eastern leaders as Ataturk (Turkey, 1924) and Sisi (Egypt, 2014), both of whom distinguished themselves by countering Islamic forces in the interest of a more Western (hence, genetically Judeo-Christian) approach to civil liberties.

WESTERN BACKSLIDING

Unfortunately, the Israeli example is lost on some avowedly Christian European and American environmentalists, who have found a way to mitigate the teaching of Genesis 1:28. At one of our *Kairos Journal* editorial meetings, we spent the day with a prominent European Christian environmentalist. Though we were in agreement on many points, a key difference emerged in our discussion of oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). While I was happy to review the evidence that the dangers outweighed the benefits, I was less impressed with his claim that the region was inviolable since it was *intrinsically* valuable since God had declared it “good.” It seemed to me that God may just have well meant that it was *instrumentally* good, a proper resource to be employed by those created in his image? Besides, if drilling there was illicit, how might we drill anywhere, since all potential sites would be inherently valuable? Would not a more stewardly approach be to find a minimally unobtrusive way to extract this great resource, without destroying such neighbors as the porcupine caribou?

I think, too, of disputes over coal. In my days with the Nashville Human Rights Project, a joint effort of Vanderbilt University and the National Endowment for the Humanities, I heard loud and clear from the people of SOCM (Save Our Cumberland Mountains), a group opposed to surface

mining in Appalachia. Now the issue is coal mining in general, for the Obama administration does not so much concern itself with the source, whether mountaintop or shaft, as with the output of coal-fired power plants. While there is certainly cause for care in regulating emissions, e.g., with “scrubbers” for the smokestacks, the president’s express intent is to destroy the whole industry. I think this reflects a callous disregard for the stewardship of an extraordinary resource. (I said as much in a piece for the Cornwall Alliance, “What Would George Washington Carver Say About Coal?” wherein I argued that the example of this sainted scientist, who got the most out the natural objects at hand, e.g., the peanut and sweet potato, better fits the Judeo-Christian understanding of stewardship.)⁵⁴

Meanwhile, Israel has imported as much as fourteen million tons of coal annually in recent years, drawing on the resources of Australia, South Africa, and Russia. They offload at the port of Ashkelon, and send the coal to two ecologically-acute electric plants. The National Coal Supply Corporation⁵⁵ oversees this operation, which includes the work of the National Coal Ash Board dedicated to turning the plants’ residue “from waste to a resource.”

If any nation understands the need for environmental care, it is Israel—a tiny lifeboat in a sea of sharks, if you will. And though much of its populace it is quite secular or pre-Christian in its thinking, Israel still exemplifies the values captured in the core scriptures of the Tanakh, and unleashes the ingenuity and industry appropriate for those created in the image of God.

THE KFAR GILEADI QUESTION

Back when Hula’s transformation was underway, a Jewish traveler struck up a conversation with one of the long-time residents:

The Arab received us in a friendly manner, which was rather surprising in these turbulent days, and with true hospitality poured us a hot, strong coffee. The seeds of hate have not taken here. [He] ... speaks with respect and reverence about [the Jews of] Kfar Gileadi, how they cultivate the land industriously, and are successful in all their undertakings.

“Isn’t your land as good as theirs?”

“There is no better land in the country. It’s a blessed land, blessed by God.”

“Why don’t you cultivate it as the folk of Kfar Gileadi do?”

“They have money and we haven’t. They also know how to work better than us. What does a Beduin know?”⁵⁶

Sad to say, the Beduins have had just as long as the Jews to sort things out, but they have not been served well by their faith.

One can scarcely imagine a reverse of this exchange, one which features a Jew speaking admiringly and enviously of an Arab engineering project on his doorstep: “The Beduin have money and we haven’t. They also know how to work better than us. What does a Jew know?”

This is absurd, of course. Indeed, the Diaspora/Holocaust Jews who stumbled off refugee boats just before, during, and after World War II, were often bereft of money. But they had a scriptural heritage, which had shaped their character over the millennia. So they set to work bringing glory, however unwittingly, to the God of Isaac and Jacob.

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