



Chapter IV

Christian Wonder and Environmental Stewardship

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Main Point: For Christians, our relationship with creation begins with wonder and culminates in stewardship. Leaders who wish to cultivate a deeper understanding of this topic should consult the referenced portions of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (see footnotes) and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (paragraphs 100, 166, 451 – 487). This chapter will explore these topics in the following points:

- The ancient Israelites differed from the ancient Babylonians. Both had creation stories, but the Israelites' stories taught that God and creation are fundamentally good. This opens the door for Christian wonder.
- Today's world is not too different from the world of the Israelites. Just like the Babylonians, many people today do not believe that the world is fundamentally good. As Christians, we have a responsibility to steward the environment with care, even though many do not treat it in the same way.
- Our world, specifically the environment, is going through unprecedented difficulties due to a lack of stewardship. We are all called to protect the world from things which threaten it.

Section 1: Babylon or Israel

The Christian view of creation begins with wonder, and Father Georges Henri Lemaitre is a perfect example. Fr. Lemaitre was a Jesuit Catholic priest and a professor of physics at the University of Louvain. His curiosity and intellectual drive allowed for great discoveries — discoveries which benefitted not only him but also the entire human race. Among other things, Fr. Lemaitre was the first to postulate the “hypothesis of the primeval atom,” more commonly known as the “Big Bang Theory.” This and other ground-breaking advances earned him an international reputation. He was globally renowned as one of the greatest minds in mathematics and physics of his day. Once, in 1933, when presenting his theory at the California Institute of Technology, Fr. Lemaitre received a standing ovation from Albert Einstein, who exclaimed, “This is the most beautiful and satisfactory explanation of creation to which I have ever listened.”¹

As a Catholic priest, Fr. Lemaitre had more reason than most people to wonder at the created universe. Why? Well, as a Catholic, Fr. Lemaitre believed that all of creation is fundamentally good. This sets Fr. Lemaitre at odds with many people and civilizations throughout history. Many, for example, have believed that creation is the product and/or plaything of an evil god or gods. For them, creation is regarded with suspicion, the product of an evil creator. Many more have believed that creation is the result of random chance, so the world is neither good nor evil. For this group, you might say creation is neutral, neither good nor bad. But for the Christian, creation is not evil. It is not neutral. Creation is deeply good! Creation is fashioned by an all-loving, all-good God who desires nothing more than to come into intimacy with his creatures. For the Christian, creation constitutes a

¹ Lambert, Dominique. “Einstein and Lemaitre: two friends, two cosmologies...” Inters.org: Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia of Religion and Science. Date Accessed: July 28, 2020. <http://inters.org/einstein-lemaitre>. See also John Farrell's *The Day Without Yesterday: Lemaitre, Einstein, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005.

kind of sign or sacrament.² It tells us something about God. Thus, for the Christian, it makes sense to be in wonder and awe of the natural world.

The first part of the 21st century has seen nature become a “fad” for both Christians and non-Christians alike. It is common to hold creation in reverence. Nevertheless, Christian wonder should not be taken for granted. Again, not all people in history have viewed creation as a good. To understand the unique standpoint of the Judeo-Christian view of creation, let’s take a moment to contrast it with another view of creation — that of the ancient Babylonians.

In the late second millennium B.C., the Babylonian people had a far different account of creation. Like most ancient civilizations, the Babylonians had gods for everything: gods of the sun, the sky, the water, even the trees. The Babylonians believed these gods had been in a long-standing war with one another and that humanity came about as a result of this war. According to the Babylonians, humans were created when a warrior god, Marduk, ordered another god to fashion human beings from the dead carcass of his defeated enemy. Marduk used the following words to “create” the human race:

“Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage, ‘man’ shall be his name.
Verily, savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods
That they might be at ease!”³

² Here, “sacrament” is not used to indicate one of the seven primary sacraments of the Catholic Church. Those sacraments — including the Eucharist, reconciliation, marriage, etc. — are established by Christ as more manifest outward signs which confer special graces. In this instance, we use the word “sacrament” in a lesser but still correct sense. Plain and simple, when we say creation is “sacramental,” we merely mean that creation shows forth certain things about God’s nature. Creation can teach us about God.

³ Boadt, Lawrence, Richard J. Clifford, and Daniel J. Harrington. *Reading the Old Testament: an Introduction*. 2nd ed. / rev. by Richard Clifford and Daniel Harrington. New York: Paulist Press, n.d. 91-93.

The Babylonian story is *far different from the Christian creation accounts in Genesis*. For the Babylonians, the universe was an arena for the gods to fight each other, and humanity was nothing more than a savage pawn in a divine game. Think about what kind of implications this would have for the Babylonian view of creation. How, for example, would a Babylonian see a sunrise? How would they interpret the coming of winter? How would they view the changing of the seasons? For the Babylonian, it would make perfect sense to view all creation with fear. After all, the Babylonian creator was a cruel warrior, and humanity itself was nothing more than a tribe of savages. The Babylonians and many other ancient civilizations understood creation quite differently than Christians do. The Babylonian worldview did not cultivate wonder; it cultivated fear.

Keeping the Babylonians in mind, let's take a moment to review the Christian story of creation. Keep in mind that the ancient Israelites lived in Babylonian captivity for many years. Thus, they would have had a deep appreciation for the value of their own creation story. You have likely heard the Genesis stories on many occasions, but let's take a quick moment to review some key passages:

*"In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth — and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters — Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night.' Evening came, and morning followed — the first day."*⁴

The first lines of the biblical creation story tell a different tale than that of the Babylonians. For the Israelites, there is only one God, and this God created all things: the light, the dark, the water, the wind, the trees, everything in creation. The wind was not the result of one

⁴ Genesis 1:1 – 5

pagan god at war with another; rather, the whole of creation was the result of a single, good God. The God of the Israelites did not create humanity a savage to serve his whims. Rather, the Israelites believed that humanity was the crown jewel of creation, and all creation was given as a gift to humanity, as we see later in the same passage:

"Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth."⁵

The Israelite creation account differs not only from that of the Babylonians, but also from any other creation story in the ancient world. This account communicates that there is only one God, a **good** God, and that creation itself is also **good**. Further, unlike the Babylonian account, humanity does not serve the elements (the wind, water and the rain). Rather, God created the elements in service to man. This put Israelites in a privileged position. Rather than being ad odds with creation, the Israelites existed in harmony with the natural order. What was for the Babylonians a relationship of antagonism is actually a relationship of cooperation. Man is not a slave or enemy of creation; instead, Scripture says he has *dominion* over it. Man rules over creation, and creation, with all its order and beauty, exists to serve humanity.

Section 2: Modern Babylonians or Christian Stewards?

What does it mean to have *dominion* over creation? The word "dominion" comes from the Latin word *dominus*, or "lord." Thus, when God gave humanity dominion over creation, he was giving humanity

⁵ Genesis 1:31

a sort of kingdom over which he could rule. Further, in this case, dominion is better understood as *stewardship* rather than kingship. A steward is one who rules over a kingdom in place of the true king. Stewards are tasked with carrying out the mission and vision of the king in his absence. In medieval times, when kings left for business abroad, they would often leave a steward in charge of their kingdom to carry on their work. Thus, while stewards were indeed lords, theirs was a special kind of lordship, a lordship involving responsibility to carry forward not their own mission, but the mission and design of the true king. This is the kind of dominion that Christians are to exercise over creation. We are called to imitate the example of the King and to respect his design.

Big problems arise when a steward forgets that he is a steward and instead acts like a king. Let's take a moment to understand the difference. A good steward guides his kingdom under the direction of the person who gave it to him: the king. A bad steward abuses his power and uses his kingdom as an instrument for his own selfish gain. Both rule their kingdom, but they do so in different ways. Unfortunately, the way most people treat the environment today resembles the second type of ruling. For them, the environment is not a sacred reality over which humanity is the steward; it is merely a tool to be manipulated. Pope Francis has said that, by disregarding the natural rules of our global ecology, modern man has severely damaged our precious global ecosystem. Reflecting on the same reality, Pope St. John Paul II said that, for modern man, "nature appears as an instrument ... a reality that he must constantly manipulate, especially by means of technology."⁶

The Catholic Church's understanding of stewardship does not allow for manipulation. You might say that where the world encourages us

⁶ John Paul II. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. 28.

to understand ourselves as *masters* and creation as mere *instrument*, the Catholic Church encourages us to view ourselves as *stewards* and creation as gift. And not just any gift, for the Church creation has an inherent design, a design which communicates God's love. In this way, creation is a kind-of sacrament. Creation is not a sacrament in the sense of the seven capital "S" Sacraments, which are official, Divinely ordained conduits of God's grace. These Sacraments have a special place in the order of grace. That said, creation is a lowercase "s" sacrament insofar as it makes God's love present on earth. Now let's be clear: The Catholic Church discourages nature worship. Creation exists to serve humanity, not vice versa. Further, humanity is infinitely more valuable than anything else in creation. Nevertheless, humanity should respect creation's design. Creation should not be approached lightly; it should be approached with a sense of wonder and awe, similar to the approach a good king takes towards his subjects. The ancient Israelites viewed creation as the handiwork of God, their true King. They knew that a healthy respect for creation's grandeur and complexity would bring about their own prosperity. For them, creation bespoke not whimsical chance, but rather the breathtaking handiwork of a divine creator. Here is just one example of the Jewish approach:

"Bless the LORD, my soul!
LORD, my God, you are great indeed!

You are clothed with majesty and splendor,
robed in light as with a cloak.

You spread out the heavens like a tent;
You raised your palace upon the waters.

You make the clouds your chariot;
You travel on the wings of the wind.

You fixed the earth on its foundation,
Never to be moved.

The ocean covered it like a garment;
Above the mountains stood the waters.

At your roar they took flight;
At the sound of your thunder they fled.

They rushed up the mountains, down the valleys
To the place you had fixed for them."⁷

Again, for the Israelites, there was an inherent order to creation, and they saw the goodness of God in this order. Sure, horrific things happened in creation, but their faith allowed them take a positive approach. Creation was not an instrument for the satisfaction of desire. Rather, creation was something to be approached with a sense of awe and reverence. Much like a good steward, the Israelites sought to work with the delicate ecology of nature, much in the same way that a good priest approaches the delicate order of the Mass. For them, creation was like a temple, in which the Lord communicated his love and power. In this way, though it rises nowhere near the importance of the Eucharist and all seven sacraments established by Christ for the Church, the Israelites possessed a *sacramental* approach to the environment.

⁷ Psalm 104:1 – 8

Application: Keepers of the Garden

Thus far, we have seen that the Christian narrative of creation is a view in which creation is essentially good, created by a single God who is also good, and that creation itself is a gift to humanity. Further, humanity possesses a certain lordship, dominion or stewardship over creation. Now that we know the basic distinction between a good and bad steward, we will now go a step further, asking once again: What does it mean to be a Christian steward?

Another way to understand our stewardship over creation is to conceive of the entire universe as a garden, a beautiful place created by God in which he seeks to meet and communicate his love to his bride, the Church. This is imagery used in Genesis in the Garden of Eden, a garden over which man is given responsibility. In creating the world, God has prepared for humans a verdant place in which to flourish — that is, if they care for that garden appropriately. Notice God's instruction in Genesis 2:15: *"The Lord God then took the man and put him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it."*⁸ Interestingly, "cultivate" comes from the root *abad*, which means "to serve, and "to take care of," comes from the root *shamar*, which means "to keep, watch, and preserve." Thus, from the very beginning of the Bible, the Lord is commanding humanity to protect and preserve the world entrusted to our care.⁹

Up to this point, this chapter has focused on Old Testament passages to trace humanity's relationship with creation, a relationship of stewardship. That said, the ultimate example of the good steward is Jesus. Christianity teaches that Christ, who is God, is the same person

⁸ Thank you to Randall Smith's "Creation and the Environment in the Hebrew Scriptures." 88. *Green Discipleship*.

⁹ Ibid.

who created the universe. When Christ became incarnate, he showed us not only the deepest nature of the universe itself, but also the manner in which it should be ruled. He showed humanity the nature of stewardship. Christ told us that the ultimate story of the universe is not the story of the Babylonians or their contemporary equivalents. The universe is not the creation of pagan gods; it is not ruled by chance, and it is much more than an instrument. On the contrary, the universe was created by the true God, a God who rules by reason and love. Creation itself is a temple that shows forth God's brilliance.

The Gospel, the greatest story ever told, is the story of God becoming man in the person of Jesus to show us how to use the gifts he gave us. In the Garden, Adam and Eve turned away from the gift that they were supposed to "till and to keep." They chose their own will over the command they received from God (their King) and thereby acted as poor stewards. In the Gospel, the Creator Himself — or the "Word"¹⁰ — both saved humanity from their sin and showed them how to reclaim the beauty of the garden. Christ, in his suffering and death, showed the sons and daughters of Adam the true meaning of "to till and to keep," or the true meaning of stewardship. True stewardship cultivates life! And not just human life, but also the life of the garden in which humanity is meant to live. The true steward takes wonder and awe at creation, cultivates creation and gives his own life to save that which He serves.

The planet is our common home, a home designed and given to us by a good King: Jesus. We are called to steward this home. Good stewards act in accord with the design of their king. Bad stewards manipulate and consume. Unfortunately, many people in today's world are bad

¹⁰ Here it is important to note that the Greek word used is *logos*, a word which, among other things, denoted the order or reason of all creation.

stewards. They disregard the environment and thereby hurt not only themselves, but also their children and future generations. Pope Francis calls out such people, encouraging them to preserve the planet for future generations:

“The Earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish. Industrial waste and chemical products utilized in cities and agricultural areas can lead to bioaccumulation in the organisms of the local population, even when levels of toxins in those places are low. Frequently no measures are taken until after people’s health has been irreversibly affected. These problems are closely linked to a throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish.”¹¹

During the last 100 years, with increased population, industrial economies and a “throw-away” mentality, stewardship is needed now more than ever. All of these have contributed to the very pressing problem mentioned by Pope Francis — that “a very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system.”¹² This means that all of us have a great responsibility not to betray future generations, but rather to act as stewards, sacrificing our selfish desires so that those who follow may live in dignity. This leaves us with a question and a challenge: What are we doing right now to ensure the good of future generations? That is, what are we doing right now to act as good stewards?

The Catholic Church is very clear, making statements perhaps stronger than any other Christian institution: “Living our vocation to

¹¹ Francis. *Laudato Si’*. 20 – 22.

¹² Ibid. 23.

be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience."¹³ And the Church not only calls Christians to external action, but also to interior conversion, saying, "[T]he ecological crisis is also a summons to interior conversion."¹⁴ What does this conversion look like? Well, the Church gives us a description of the conversion, and the description has a lot in common with the wonder and awe that the Israelites articulated so many years ago:

"Various convictions of our faith ... can help us to enrich the meaning of this conversion. These include the awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us, and the security that Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light. Then too, there is the recognition that God created the world, writing into it an order and a dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore. We read in the Gospel that Jesus says of the birds of the air that 'not one of them is forgotten before God' (Lk 12:6). How then can we possibly mistreat them or cause them harm? I ask all Christians to recognize and to live fully this dimension of their conversion."¹⁵

¹³ Ibid. 216.

¹⁴ Ibid. 217.

¹⁵ Francis. *Laudato Si'*. 221.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Section 1: Babylon or Israel

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

The Christian view of creation begins with wonder, and Father Georges Henri Lemaitre is a perfect example. Fr. Lemaitre was a Jesuit Catholic priest and a professor of physics at the University of Louvain. His curiosity and intellectual drive allowed for great discoveries — discoveries which benefitted not only him but also the entire human race. Among other things, Fr. Lemaitre was the first to postulate the “hypothesis of the primeval atom,” more commonly known as the “Big Bang Theory.” This and other ground-breaking advances earned him an international reputation. He was globally renowned as one of the greatest minds in mathematics and physics of his day. Once, in 1933, when presenting his theory at the California Institute of Technology, Fr. Lemaitre received a standing ovation from Albert Einstein, who exclaimed, “This is the most beautiful and satisfactory explanation of creation to which I have ever listened.”¹

1. What about this story stands out to you? Did you know that the Big Bang Theory was developed by a priest?

¹ Lambert, Dominique. “Einstein and Lemaître: two friends, two cosmologies...” Inters.org: Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia of Religion and Science. Date Accessed: July 28, 2020. <http://inters.org/einstein-lemaître>. See also John Farrell's *The Day Without Yesterday: Lemaître, Einstein, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005.

Response: Let the students discuss. The goal here is to provide students with an example of someone possessing exemplary intellectual curiosity and virtue.

2. Fr. Lemaitre was filled with wonder at creation. What do you think enabled him to be filled with such wonder?

Response: Fr. Lemaitre's faith enabled him to look at creation as the handiwork of a benevolent creator.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Obviously not everyone views the universe as the creation of a benevolent God. Indeed, it was in part to counter the false views of the Babylonians that motivated the Israelites to write their creation myths. One of those myths was written during the time of the Babylonian captivity.

Like most ancient civilizations, the Babylonians had gods for everything: gods of the sun, the sky, the water, even the trees. The Babylonians believed these gods had been in a long-standing war with one another and that humanity came about as a result of this war. According to the Babylonians, humans were created when a warrior god, Marduk, ordered another god to fashion human beings from the dead carcass of his defeated enemy. Marduk used the following words to "create" the human race:

"Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage, 'man' shall be his name.
Verily, savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods
That they might be at ease!"²

² Boadt, Lawrence, Richard J. Clifford, and Daniel J. Harrington. *Reading the Old Testament: an Introduction*. 2nd ed. / rev. by Richard Clifford and Daniel Harrington. New York: Paulist Press, n.d. 91-93.

The Babylonian story is *far* different from the Christian creation accounts in Genesis. For the Babylonians, the universe was an arena for the gods to fight each other, and humanity was nothing more than a savage pawn in a divine game.

3. How would you explain a Babylonian's view of creation, in your own words?

Response: Discuss. Help guide responses to include the following: (1) the Babylonians believed in many gods; (2) they viewed humanity as pawns in the wars of the gods; and (3) the Babylonians viewed the elements as things which the gods would sometimes use to punish them.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

In contrast to the Babylonian view, the Christian view is very different. Let's look at the Christian view of creation in Scripture.

(Read Genesis 1:1 – 5.)

(Read Genesis 1:31.)

4. How does this story compare with the Babylonians?

Response: The Israelites believed the world was created by only one God, the true God, and this God thought creation was very good. It's important that students understand the profundity of this statement.

5. How did the Israelites view the relationship between God, creation and humanity? Why is this important?

Response: For the Israelites, humanity was created as good, very good! In fact, humanity was created in the image and likeness of God! Further, all of creation was given as a gift to him.

Section 2: Modern Babylonians or Christian Stewards?

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

A steward is one who rules over a kingdom in place of the true king. Stewards are tasked with carrying out the mission and vision of the king in his absence. In medieval times, when kings left for business abroad, they would often leave a steward in charge of their kingdom to carry on their work. Thus, while stewards were indeed lords, theirs was a special kind of lordship, a lordship involving responsibility to carry forward not their own mission, but the mission and design of the true king.

6. Based on this definition, what qualities would one expect of a good steward? What about a bad steward?

Response: A good steward is someone who acts in accord with the intentions of the king. A bad steward is someone who disregards the intentions of the king to feed his own selfish inclinations.

7. What are some qualities that we would expect of a bad steward? How would a bad steward treat the environment?

Response: Discuss.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

It is true that Christianity teaches that we do indeed rule over creation. Let's be clear: It is humanity that has dominion over creation, and not vice versa. Nevertheless, it is clear from the Psalms that Christians are called to have a certain reverence for that which they rule. Let's look at one of the Psalms that demonstrates this:

(Read Psalm 104:1 – 8.)

8. Do you understand the difference between nature worship (man serving nature) vs. Christian stewardship?

Response: Discuss.

Application: True Stewardship

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Thus far, we have seen that the Christian narrative of creation is a view in which creation is essentially good, created by a single God who is also good, and that creation itself is a gift to humanity. Further, humanity possesses a certain lordship, dominion or stewardship over creation. Now that we know the basic distinction between a good and bad steward, we will now go a step further, asking once again: What does it mean to be a Christian steward?

Another way to understand our stewardship over creation is to conceive of the entire universe as a garden, a beautiful place created by God in which he seeks to meet and communicate his love to his bride, the Church. This is imagery used in Genesis in the Garden of Eden, a garden over which man is given responsibility. In creating the world, God has prepared for humans a verdant place in which to

flourish — that is, if they care for that garden appropriately. Let's look at God's command to Adam and Eve in the Garden:

(Read Genesis 2:15.)

9. What is God asking of Adam and Eve here? What might it look like for them to carry out God's command?

Response: Discuss. Help your group see a picture of Adam and Eve caring for the gift they have been given.

10. Let's look deeper at the meaning of this passage: "cultivate" comes from the root *abad*, which means "to serve, and "to take care of," comes from the root *shamar*, which means "to keep, watch, and preserve." With these meanings in mind, what did it mean for Adam and Eve to "cultivate and care for" creation? What does that mean for us today?

Response: Discuss. Help your group go deeper than the previous question and make connections to the current day.

11. Reflecting on this Bible verse, the Church has traditionally referred to man's role in creation as that of a steward. Remember, a steward acts in place of king. If we are the steward, who is the king? What can we learn from this king about stewardship?

Response: See application section of Leader's Guide. Emphasize Christ's willingness to sacrifice His own welfare for the good of others.

12. The Church says that "living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience." How might the world look differently, if all Christians lived out this vision for stewardship of creation?

Response: Allow students to discuss.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

As we've seen, caring for creation affects each of us as Christians. Pope Francis emphasized this when he said:

"Various convictions of our faith...can help us to enrich the meaning of this conversion. These include the awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us, and the security that Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light. Then too, there is the recognition that God created the world, writing into it an order and a dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore. We read in the Gospel that Jesus says of the birds of the air that 'not one of them is forgotten before God' (Lk 12:6). How then can we possibly mistreat them or cause them harm? I ask all Christians to recognize and to live fully this dimension of their conversion."³

13. How do you view your relationship with the environment? Have you allowed your Christianity to influence the way that you treat the planet?

Response: Discuss.

14. What practical steps can you take this next year to ensure help protect the environment for future generations?

Response: Discuss.

³ Francis. *Laudato Si'*. 221.

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