

Where Mortals Dwell

*A Christian View of Place
for Today*

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Introduction

What Is Place?

Place is ubiquitous and yet always particular. Place is my backyard in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, where the spring bulbs are now flowering and where a wild rabbit comes for a time to rest and graze, at peace amidst this busy city. Place is my office, painted a warm yellow by friends when I moved in here and where I sit to write this book. Place is the unutterable beauty of the Valley of a Thousand Hills, near where I grew up in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, the same context in which Alan Paton's classic novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*,¹ is set.

Cry, the Beloved Country poured out of Paton while he was on a trip to Europe in 1946. Having just arrived in Norway and after visiting a cathedral, filled with intense homesickness, he returned to his hotel room, where he wrote the opening lines of what was to become a classic: "There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it."² That same beloved country is the scene of Nobel Prize-winning author J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, with its almost unreadable accounts of rape and violence in postapartheid South Africa.

Place is the rich, African beauty of Rwanda and churches filled with human skulls from the genocide that still—how long?—indelibly marks the landscape

1. The title is drawn from a phrase that is used several times in the book. For example, from p. 80: "Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply. Let him not laugh too gladly when the water runs through his fingers, nor stand too silent when the setting sun makes red the veld with fire. Let him not be too moved when the birds of his land are singing, nor give too much of his heart to a mountain or a valley. For fear will rob him of all if he gives too much."

2. See Paton, *Towards the Mountain*, 264–74.

of that country. Place is an Amish farm, and the animal factory, “which, like the concentration camp, is a vision of Hell.”³ Place is the home one retreats to for rest and nourishment, and place is the “homes” that are the scene of abuse. Place is Mother Teresa’s home for the dying in Calcutta—“something beautiful for God”—with its translucent light caught on camera by Malcolm Muggeridge, and also Birkenau and Auschwitz. Place is gardens and parks, and millions of kilometers of road and millions of square acres of tarred parking lots. Place is my house, my garden, the university at which I teach, the city in which I live, the malls in which I shop, and the roads and trails on which I run. Place is where you are right now as you read this book.

Place is a rich, thick⁴ concept which is notoriously difficult to define. As Aristotle rightly noted, “The question, what is place? presents many difficulties.”⁵ Place is real, but it is a complex creational structure. Place is so fundamental to human existence and so ubiquitous that, paradoxically, it is easy to miss.⁶ Its reality and importance cannot be in doubt, but the neglect of it and its thickness make it hard to pin down conceptually. The result is that today many scholars write about place without attempting to define it. In part 2 and at the start of part 3 we will explore the structure of place in more detail. For now we will highlight some of the central elements that constitute place, elements that will guide us as we continue on our journey of exploration.

Firstly, place is a quintessentially *human* concept in that it is part of our creatureliness. E. Casey, who has done the most comprehensive work on the philosophy of place, notes that “to be in the world, to be situated at all, is to be in place. Place is the phenomenal particularization of ‘being-in-the-world,’ a phrase that in Heidegger’s hands retains a certain formality and abstractness which only the concreteness of *being-in-place*, that is, being in the *place-world* itself, can mitigate.”⁷ Casey speaks in this respect of the human condition as one of *implacement*: “To exist at all . . . is to have a place—to be *implaced*, however minimally or temporarily.”⁸ Part of being embodied involves being in a particular place: “In my embodied being I am *just at* a place as its inner boundary; a surrounding landscape, on the other hand, is *just beyond* that place as its outer boundary. Between the two boundaries—and very much as a function of their different interplay—implacement occurs. Place is what takes place between body and landscape.”⁹

3. W. Berry, *Way of Ignorance*, 99.

4. In Geertz’s sense of the term as found in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 5–6, 9–10.

5. Aristotle, *Physics* 4.1.34.

6. Cf. Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 177–78.

7. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, xv. Emphasis original. Casey notes that “Heidegger alone of postmodern thinkers has thematized place, albeit fragmentarily and inconsistently” (*Fate of Place*, 11). It is therefore not surprising that Casey uses Heidegger’s terminology in defining place.

8. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 13. Emphasis original.

9. *Ibid.*, 29. Emphasis original.

Secondly, since to be human is to be placed, it follows that place results from the *dynamic interaction* of humans and their particular locations. While human existence in the world is possible only in and through a particular place, place is also shaped and constituted by the activity of the humans who dwell in it. The interplay between humans and their contexts means that place has a developmental, *cultural* dimension.¹⁰ Place is furthermore never individualistic; rather, it “insinuates itself into a collectivity.”¹¹ There is inevitably a *social* dimension to place; humans are placed in relationship, and in relationship they form and fashion places. Implacement is an ongoing, dynamic process, and, being cultural and social, it is also *historical*. These dimensions contribute “to the felt density of a particular place, the sense that it has something lasting to it.”¹² An exploration of place will thus attend to dimensions such as the natural landscape, flora and fauna, patterns of weather and sky, the human shaping of a place and its resources, the history of a place, memory, and the individual and communal narratives with which a place is imbued.¹³

Thirdly, although *space* and *place* are inseparable, place must be distinguished from space. As we will see in part 2, place is part of our lived, everyday experience, whereas space, especially in our modern world, is a theoretical concept and as such an abstraction *from* the lived experience of place. There has been a fatal tendency in modernity to privilege abstract, scientific knowledge over everyday experience as the path to the truth about the world. Such an approach sounds the death knell for place, since it fails to do justice to the thick, rich, holding action of local habitation.¹⁴ Primacy must, we will argue, be given to lived, everyday experience in our knowledge of the world.

Why Does Place Matter?

We live amidst a crisis of place. In our late-modern age we have lost that very human sense of place amidst the time-space compression¹⁵ characteristic of “postmodernity” and globalization. Place has become something that one moves through, preferably at great speed, and virtual reality is no *replacement*. As David Lyon perceptively notes of cyberspace, “There is no place to this space.”¹⁶ Casey describes our culture as *dromocratic*, that is, as a speed-bound era.¹⁷ Indeed, the suffering of placelessness is not confined to refugees and those in exile, agonizing as their experiences are; in our dromocratic

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 31.

12. Ibid., 33.

13. Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 185.

14. Casey, *Fate of Place*, 20.

15. See Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 260–83, on this theme.

16. Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 124. Cf. Casey, *Fate of Place*, xiv; and Ward, *Cities of God*, 245.

17. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, xiv.

society every person constantly “on the move” suffers from placelessness in one form or another.

In part 2 we will track how “space” won over “place” in modernity, leading to the neglect and suppression of place. According to Casey,

In the past three centuries in the West—the period of “modernity”—place has come to be not only neglected but actively suppressed. Owing to the triumph of the natural and social sciences in this same period, any serious talk of place has been regarded as regressive or trivial. . . . For an entire epoch, place has been regarded as an impoverished second cousin of Time and Space, those two colossal cosmic partners towering over modernity.¹⁸

But place will not go away! One can ignore place, but it is unavoidable:

We are immersed in it and could not do without it. To be at all—to exist in any way—is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over them and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced.¹⁹

The neglect of place has thus had devastating consequences. In our late-modern context we are witnessing the development of global cities in which “place no longer matters and . . . the only type of worker that matters is the highly educated professional.”²⁰ The dehumanizing effect of Western urban sprawl is well documented. The crisis of city life is related to the concomitant crisis of rural and agrarian life. Problems in both areas are symptomatic of the larger crisis of place central to late-modernity.

Harvey Cox celebrates the gifts of the modern city as anonymity and mobility.²¹ W. Brueggemann, however, perceptively notes that we suffer not so much from anomie but more foundationally from *atopia*, placelessness:²²

That promise concerned human persons who could lead detached, unrooted lives of endless choice and no commitment. It was glamorized around the virtues of mobility and anonymity that seemed so full of promise for freedom and self-actualization. But it has failed. . . . It is now clear that a *sense of place* is a human hunger that urban promise has not met. . . . It is *rootlessness* and not *meaninglessness* that characterizes the current crisis. There are no meanings apart from roots.²³

18. *Ibid.*, xiv.

19. Casey, *Fate of Place*, ix.

20. Saskia Sassen, quoted in Ward, *Cities of God*, 242.

21. Cox, *Secular City*, 33–51.

22. Terminology is from Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, xi.

23. Brueggemann, *The Land*, 3–4. Emphasis original.

Place is so constituent of human being that perhaps this is one reason why it is so easily overlooked. But we desperately need to recover a sense of place and placemaking. “The present moment is a propitious one for assessing the fate of place. This is so even though there is precious little talk of place in philosophy—or, for that matter, in psychology or sociology, literary theory or religious studies.”²⁴ Theology and biblical studies suffer a similar neglect.²⁵ Emphases on an existentialist approach and a great-deeds approach resulted in the neglect of creation, nature, land, and place in most biblical theology. Brueggemann’s *The Land* marked a significant reversal in this trend, and, encouragingly, an ecological biblical hermeneutic and theology are emerging with similar concerns. However, it is rare to find theologians and biblical exegetes working specifically with the concept of *place*. As we will see, “place” is particularly well suited to excavate key elements of the biblical message and to help us recover a robust practice of place today.

As part 3 of this book indicates, place has a very practical bent to it. Our concern is a recovery not just of a Christian view of place but of *placemaking*. It is here that the richness and sheer *joie de vivre* of place come firmly into view, as well as the agonizing ways in which place is misdirected in our day. However, there is no quick fix to such recovery; rigorous biblical work is required (part 1), as well as excavations into the Western philosophical and Christian traditions (part 2), so that we can see how we have arrived at *this* place, and how we can be reoriented by Scripture and the best of the Christian tradition toward a recovery of place today.

24. Casey, *Fate of Place*, xi–xii.

25. Inge, *Christian Theology of Place*, is an important exception.

Place in the Bible

For the Bible is *the* authority, insofar as any historical document is authoritative, for every kind of Christian theology. If we do not know what the Bible says about nature [place], therefore, the whole enterprise of historical exploration of the classical theological tradition could easily be questioned.¹

Is the final aim of God, in his governance of all things, to bring into being at the very end a glorified kingdom of spirits alone who, thus united with God, may contemplate him in perfect bliss, while as a precondition of their ecstasy all the other creatures of nature must be left by God to fall away into eternal oblivion?

Or is the final aim of God, in his governance of all things, to communicate his life to another in a way that calls forth at the very end new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, a transfigured cosmos where peace is universally established between all creatures at last, in the midst of which is situated a glorious city of resurrected saints who dwell in justice, blessed with all the resplendent fullness of the earth, and who continually call upon all creatures to join with them in their joyful praise of the one who is all in all?²

As Santmire points out in the above quotes, Scripture is *the* authority for the church; thus, close attention to its teaching is crucial for any theology of place. As we will discover in this section, not only is “place” a fertile grid through which to approach the Bible, but the Bible also yields a staggering amount of data relating to place.

1. Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 175. Emphasis original.

2. *Ibid.*, 217–18.

1

The Theology of Place in Genesis 1–3

The world is the house where mortals dwell.¹

Although most scholars nowadays consider the early chapters of Genesis to have been written later than much of the Old Testament, canonically they sit at the outset of the drama of Scripture and in this respect they are foundational. They contain the early acts in the great drama that unfolds, and without them the drama simply cannot be understood. As we will see, they are similarly foundational for a theology of place, and at the same time approaching them through the grid of place is revealing in terms of their theology.

Genesis 1:1–2:3

A Place Story

Genesis 1 is carefully crafted literature with a polemical dimension which sets it against alternative creation stories of the ancient Near East while articulating its own distinctive worldview. Ideological questions have been raised about Genesis 1, and particularly about humankind's relation to the earth.² Norman Habel's ecological reading of Genesis 1 is worth noting in this respect.

1. Heidegger, *Hebel der Hausfreund*, 13.

2. The most well-known critique is that by White, "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."

Habel rightly observes that while Genesis 1:1–2:3 is cosmic in its scope, its focus is clearly on the earth. According to Habel, “the earth story at the beginning of Genesis is a dramatic account that celebrates the wonder and worth of Earth as a geophany.”³ For Habel, earth is the primary character of the story, and the reader eagerly awaits her appearance and development. He finds this earth story, however, to be in stark contrast to the story of the creation of humans in 1:26–30: “The human story (Gen. 1:26–30) violates the spirit of the earth-oriented story that precedes it (Gen. 1:1–25).”⁴ Genesis 1 moves from honoring earth to negating it as a force to be overcome by humanity.⁵ In Habel’s view it is time we restored the earth story to its rightful place as a genuine counterpart to the human story, with which the earth story interacts in subsequent narratives in Genesis.

There are several difficulties with Habel’s discernment of conflicting narratives in Genesis 1, difficulties which I have discussed in detail elsewhere.⁶ For our purposes it is important to note that the whole point of Genesis 1 is to present the earth as the context for human habitation, for implacement. The earth is one of the major actors in the narrative, but so too is the human, and one of the motifs of the narrative is how humans are to interact with the earth. Thus it is far better to see Genesis 1 as a *place* story than as an earth story. Place evokes human inhabitation of the earth, and in this respect it helps us to see what is going on in Genesis 1 far better than a renewed source criticism which uses ideological critique to discern conflicting stories. Genesis 1 portrays the earth as a *potential* place for human habitation and dwelling. As Heidegger notes, “The world is the house where mortals dwell.”⁷

Differentiation of/and Place

Contra the *Enuma Elish* and other ancient Near Eastern creation stories, the differentiation of place that occurs during the six days of Genesis 1 is oriented toward creating a context suitable for human implacement and flourishing. The gradual differentiation of place that we find in Genesis 1 is, however, common to other creation stories. As Casey notes, “The cosmogonic gathering is in effect a formation of place. Thus, even if the beginning is characterized as a situation of no-place, the ineluctable *nisus* is towards place—and towards an ever increasing specificity of place, its laying out in the

3. Habel, “Geophany,” 35.

4. *Ibid.*, 47.

5. *Ibid.*, 48.

6. Bartholomew, “Theology of Place in Genesis 1–3.”

7. Casey notes, “If Bachelard is right in claiming that ‘all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home’ and that home itself is ‘a real cosmos in every sense of the word,’ then home and cosmos alike—home *as* cosmos—result from practices of cultivation” (*Getting Back into Place*, 175).

right . . . order.”⁸ Creation involves differentiation, and this is progressively more determinate and leads toward human inhabitation. The differentiation of a variety of places is evident in Genesis 1 from the fivefold use of the Hebrew root *bdl* (divide, separate; vv. 4, 6, 7, 14, 18). “From the principle of separation, light; via something which separates, heaven; to something which is separated, earth and sea; to things which are productive of separated things, trees, for example; then things which can separate themselves from their places, heavenly bodies; and finally a being which can separate itself from its right way, the right way.”⁹ Clearly the separation in Genesis has more than place in view, but place is an essential element emerging from the differentiation process. Indeed, the placial ordering of the creation is already indicated in 1:1, in which the heavens and the earth are the objects of God’s creative activity. By itself *haššāmayim* means “sky” or heaven as the abode of God, but here in 1:1 we have a spatial merism, according to which the totality of a thing is indicated by its two extremes, so that the reference is to the whole of the universe.

Central to the separation process and the repetitive “Let there be” is the introduction of time and thus history. Genesis 1:1–2:3 is structured around the seven days, and theologically it is vital to note that no tension is envisioned between this timedness of creation—including cyclical seasons (v. 14)—and the earth, the waters, plants, birds, animals, and humankind. As in the rest of the Bible, there is in Genesis 1 no dichotomy between “nature” and “history,” though the finding there of such a dichotomy has bedeviled modern Old Testament scholarship, giving rise to a false dualism between creation and redemption and between history and nature.¹⁰

Genesis 1’s theology of place is thus presented in the context of a complex, dynamic understanding of creation as ordered by God. The specific places mentioned are the earth (v. 10),¹¹ the seas (v. 10), and the sky (v. 8). The earth is “occupied” by vegetation and animals. Similarly, creatures are made to inhabit the seas and the sky. Humankind does not transcend this order but is part of it; as God’s royal steward, humankind finds its place and flourishes through submission to this order:

This network of structures and functions, governed by creational law, manifests his [God’s] loving care *for all creatures. Every creature*, each in its own unique way, is subject to his constant yet dynamic ecosystem of creational laws. Compliance with it is not an odious burden. . . . The creation order is evidence of the

8. Casey, *Fate of Place*, 15–16.

9. Strauss, “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” 12–13. Cf. Kass, *Beginning of Wisdom*, 31–36.

10. See Hiebert, *Yahwist’s Landscape*, 3–22.

11. “Earth” (*’eres*) is used in three different ways in Gen. 1: as part of the merism in v. 1, to refer to the whole of the planet in v. 2, and to refer to the dry land masses in vv. 9–10.

caring hand of the Creator reaching out to secure the well-being of his creatures, of a Father extending a universe full of blessings to his children.¹²

Insofar as Genesis 1 is concerned, the move toward place is particularly strong because, contra other ancient Near Eastern creation stories, Genesis 1 presents a picture of the earth being shaped into an environment that is very good for human habitation, rather than of humankind being created to make the lives of the gods easier.¹³ As Barth notes, this is particularly true from the fourth day onward:

The wisdom and goodness of the Creator abound in the fact that, following the creation, establishment and securing of a sphere of human life, He wills to fashion and does fashion it as a *dwelling-place* for the man who can recognize God and himself and his fellow-creatures, and who in the recognition of what is and occurs can be grateful and express his gratitude. . . . The office of these lights, the heavenly bodies, is to summon him in relation to his Maker to sight, consciousness and activity.¹⁴

Because day and night have already been created, there is a sense in which the luminaries are redundant, but not only are they not gods, they are given as signs *for humankind*, to demarcate seasons, days, and years (1:14).¹⁵ In the surrounding cultures it was common practice to worship the star-studded heavens, but as Kass rightly notes, in Genesis 1 “not heaven, but man has the closest relation to God.” In this sense 1:26–30 is indeed the high point of 1:1–2:3, since it involves the implacement of those earthly creatures made in God’s image in the home he has prepared for them. As Heidegger notes, “The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially.”¹⁶

Thus, approaching Genesis 1 through the prism of place helps us to see that earth and humankind are both central characters in the narrative and that a central motif is their interrelationship. There remains the question of whether or not 1:26–30 affirms exploitation of the earth. Much has been written about this issue, and attention is focused on *wəyirdû* in 1:26 (“let them have dominion”) and *wəkibšūhā* (“and subdue it”) in 1:28.¹⁷

12. Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 178. Emphasis added. On creation order see 178–94.

13. Cf. here sec. 6 of the *Enuma Elish*, where man is created: “He shall be charged with the service of the gods / That they might be at ease!” (in O’Brien and Major, *In the Beginning*, 25).

14. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 157. Emphasis added.

15. *Ibid.*, 160.

16. Heidegger, “Building. Dwelling. Thinking.” 359.

17. Jacob, for example, says of *kbs* in Gen. 1:28, “With this one word, echoed again in Psalms 115:16, humanity is granted unlimited sovereignty over the planet earth; therefore no work that is done on it, for example drilling or the levelling of mountains, drying up or diverting rivers, and similar things, can be regarded as a violent ravaging that is repugnant to God” (*Das Erste Buch der Tora Genesis*, 61).

Place and “Dominion”

Rdh, the root of *wēyirdû*, can indeed have the connotation of brutal mastery, as for example in Leviticus 26:17, but it need not, and the context invariably determines its nuance. Thus in Leviticus 25:53 the resident alien who hires an Israelite as a laborer does indeed “rule” (*rdh*) over him, but is not to do so with harshness. Similarly in Ezekiel 34:4 the shepherds of Israel are castigated because they rule (*rdh*) over the Israelites with force and harshness. This section is followed in Ezekiel (34:31) by a wonderful vision of a very different type of rule, that of the LORD God, whose rule will result in the Israelites being “secure on their soil” (34:27). Ezekiel 34 is illuminating in terms of Genesis 1 because humankind’s rule is a major way in which humankind images God. God, and not humankind, is the central character in the creation narrative, and dominion is best understood as a royal stewardship in which humankind’s role is to serve, develop, and indwell the creation in such a way that it is enhanced and God is honored.¹⁸ In my opinion the decisive key in this respect is that Genesis 1 envisages humans as herbivores; according to 1:29 the plants and the fruit of the trees are provided for food, not, by implication, the animals. Indeed, the same “table” is set for the animals!

Kbš, the root of *wēkibšūhā*, is used of the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites (cf. Num. 32:22, 29), but, as N. Lohfink persuasively argues, it is best understood in these contexts as “to take possession of,”¹⁹ so that in Genesis 1 *kbš* refers not to wanton destruction but to multiplication and expansion over the earth. E. F. Davis argues suggestively that *kbš* means “conquest” here but is used ironically; in the ears of landless exiles in Babylon it would evoke the land and the judgment that abuse of the land had resulted in, as well as hope of taking possession of the land once again.²⁰ Either way, wanton destruction of the earth and of animals is not in mind; humankind is viewed not only as vegetarian but as imaging God in his *good* creation. The occurrence of the seventh and final notice of fulfillment—“And it was so”—at the end of 1:30 follows God’s provision of food for humans *and* animals, who are also referred to as having the breath of life. The elaborate stress on food for humans *and* animals in verses 29–30, which concludes the making of humans in God’s image, suggests that an important way in which humans are to image God

18. Barth notes that “he [the man] thus appears as the being which must be able to and ready to serve in order to give meaning and purpose to the planting of the earth. . . . In view of his complete integration in the totality of the created world, there can be no question of a superiority of man supported by appeals to his special dignity, or of forgetfulness not merely of a general but of the very definite control of Yahweh Elohim over man. In spite of all the particular things that God may plan and do with him, in the first instance man can only serve the earth and will continually have to do so” (*Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 235).

19. N. Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch*, 10.

20. E. F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 59–63.

is by perpetuating the abundant sufficiency God has built into his creation.²¹ This is a far cry from brutal exploitation.

While the move in Genesis 1 *is* toward the creation of a perfect home for humankind, it is important to notice that the goodness of creation does not depend upon humankind but upon God. Prior to 1:26 some form of the phrase “And God saw that it was good” occurs six times, a reminder that the value of creation lies in its coming from the hand of God and not merely in its utilitarian value for humankind. Light, varieties of vegetation, seed, the sun and the moon, birds, animals, and sea creatures are all called “good”! And God’s “very good” comes as he contemplates “*everything* that he had made” (1:31, emphasis added).

Wallace rightly notes the significance of Genesis 2:1–3 in this respect. Verse 1 stresses once again the interrelatedness and completeness of the creation. “Genesis 2.1–3 stands as a check against any interpretation of the role of humans in Genesis 1.28 that ignores the harmony and wholeness of all the work God has done in creation.”²² Polemically 2:1–3 establishes a calendar contrary to the Mesopotamian practice of a Sabbath related to the day of the full moon. The Israelite calendar is connected not to heavenly bodies but directly to the creator God. In contrast to the Akkadian and Ugaritic narratives, in which the god’s rest is achieved at the expense of humankind, who are created to relieve the gods of manual labor, the Genesis account of creation represents humans as intended to participate in God’s rest. Thus, “The seventh day is a recognition that the creation is held together by God and that God is the one on whom it is totally dependent.”²³

Being Human

The genre of Genesis 1:1–2:3 is contested; Blocher argues that it is wisdom literature,²⁴ whereas Davis and Brueggemann have suggested that it is a liturgical poem.²⁵ These proposals are not antithetical, and clearly God’s contemplation of his creation and his declaration of it as good and very good encourage the reader to wonder at his handiwork and to explore its intricacy. At its best, the work of Christians in natural history has done and continues to do precisely this. Davis refers to Erazim Kohák’s analysis of our need for a “contemplative strategy” that enables us to stand “in mute awe before the wonder of being.”²⁶ Genesis 1 inducts us into a way of seeing the world such that we stand in awe before the creator and his marvelous handiwork, of which we ourselves are a part.

21. Cf. *ibid.*, 58.

22. Wallace, “Rest for the Earth?,” 53.

23. *Ibid.*, 58.

24. Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 32.

25. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 43; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 26, 30.

26. Erazim Kohák, quoted in Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 46.

As part of its polemic Genesis 1 reminds its hearers, as noted above, that humankind has a closer relationship to God than any other creature. In this way Genesis 1 cuts through the Platonism and Neoplatonism that have so infected Christian theology through the centuries, hindering us from finding God *where* we are. B. Taylor observes that nowadays people will travel great distances searching for the divine and wisdom, but

the last place most people look is right under their feet, in the everyday activities, accidents, and encounters of their lives. . . . My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world.²⁷

God is encountered by humankind in *this place* in which he has implied us. And in this extraordinary creation humans are unique as image bearers; Genesis 1 clearly sets humankind apart from other creatures, giving us a unique role of dominion over them and charging us to “subdue” the earth. As G. Spykman so eloquently states,

All creatures, great and small, are gifted—whether belonging to the kingdom of plants, animals or things—each true to its own nature: the lily as a lily, the lion as a lion; likewise the stars, the moon and the sun. . . . Those creatures also serve which can only stand and wait, willy-nilly, on the fixed laws of creation, complying without freedom of choice: falling rocks, shooting stars, budding trees, migrating birds, and hibernating animals. These creatures have been entrusted to our care to help make us, as earthkeepers, better servants of our Lord. . . . We, as responsible stewards, are free to domesticate their instincts, cultivate their use, and harness their powers, but always with tender, loving care. . . . With all our potentials—our rationality, imagination, feeling, culture-forming activity—we are called to play our servant roles in creation.²⁸

It is an extraordinary vision of what it means to be human! One can only imagine what the Israelites, amidst their vulnerable existence, thought of this view of humanity. As a non-seafaring people, how would they have imagined exercising dominion over the sea creatures? Sadly, today we are at the other end of the spectrum, with the three great places of Genesis—land, sea,²⁹ and sky³⁰—all under threat from humankind.

27. B. Taylor, *Altar in the World*, xiv–xv.

28. Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 250.

29. On the current state of our oceans, see Safina, *Song for the Blue Ocean*.

30. Not only have we polluted the atmosphere, but outer space has become a new junkyard as satellites, rockets, and other debris are discarded.

When it comes to plants, fish, birds, and other animals, we are perennially tempted either to analyze them through a reductionistic scientific “objectivity” or to romanticize them by projecting human traits onto them. Neither approach is helpful, and, as we will see in part 2, both stem from the dominance of a reductionistic science which is incapable of doing justice to the full dimensions of human experience of the world. The elevation in the West of “rational empirical knowledge” has led to the “*disenchantment* of the world and its transformation into a causal mechanism.”³¹ For recovering a rich, holistic experience of “nature”—what is commonly called “*reenchantment*”³²—while avoiding both of the dangers above, the doctrine of creation is crucial. As long as academic work remains in the grip of the modern subject-object dichotomy, we will never recover a rich view of place which avoids the dangers of both scientism and a New Age pantheism, which undermines the distinction between humans and the rest of creation.

The doctrine of creation alerts us to the interwoven coherence of the whole of creation as well as the ordered distinctions within it. Placially this is significant: the birds predominate in the sky, fish in the waters; animals and humankind live on the land and feed off the plants. But this does not imply a utilitarian ethic according to which the plants (or animals) are brought into existence only as food. The creation comes into existence progressively as a coherent whole, and part of humankind’s stewardship will be to continue to ensure that the earth brings forth vegetation in a way that is “good,” so that birds, fish, and animals are able to flourish in the environments designated for *them*.

Creation, Place, and Modern Science

Genesis 1:1–2:3 depicts progressive placial development and careful distinctions, as well as coherent wholeness. Humans alone are made in the *imago Dei* and in this respect are different from animals and birds and trees. But this difference calls for respect and not brutal mastery. The animals are indeed brought before Adam in Genesis 2 to be named by him, but the spirit of this naming is well captured in T. Herriot’s experience of what awoke his interest in birds: “The thought of creatures being endemic to the place I lived stirred something to life in my brain. I began to see that learning the names of things mattered, not so much in the possession it afforded as in its capacity to call things forth from generality into a particularity that allowed for admiration, familiarity, even wonder.”³³ Language and naming is a central element in attentiveness to, and the formation of, place, so that one way for us to recover a sense of place is to recover our rich heritage of placial language, even as it threatens

31. M. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, 564. Emphasis added.

32. Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*.

33. Herriot, *Grass, Sky, Song*, 12.

to collapse into what B. Lopez calls “an attenuated list of almost nondescript words.”³⁴ With an amazing group of writers, Lopez has edited *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*, an alphabetical resource aimed at just such a recovery. As he notes in his introduction, “We put a geometry to the land—backcountry, front range, high desert—and pick out patterns in it: pool and rifle, swale and riffle, swale and rise, basin and range. We make it remote (north forty), vivid (bird-foot delta), and humorous (Detroit riprap). It is a language that keeps us from slipping off into abstract space.”³⁵

Modern science, however, under the influence of the Enlightenment, has produced reductionistic models of inquiry which marginalize wonder and joy amidst the creation, which encourage mastery and marginalize the richness of the lived experience of place in favor of abstract space.³⁶ In contemporary natural history this problem is evident in the tension between writers’ rich experience of place and the fear of unscientific anthropomorphism. Indeed, we urgently need an epistemology which can open up the richness and multifaceted dimensions of the world without collapsing important distinctions. Fortunately there is no shortage of scholars who have addressed these issues.

Martin Buber’s work is important for our purposes; he distinguishes between “orientation,” which is the “objective” attitude typical of so much science, and “realization,” the approach which foregrounds the inner meaning of life. As is well known, Buber distinguished between the *I-it* and the *I-Thou* relationships. *I-it* is the attitude characteristic of science, whereas *I-Thou* evokes meeting and encounter. Significantly, Buber insisted that the *I-Thou* relationship should not be restricted to interpersonal relations but include nature and culture.³⁷

The insights of the Dutch Christian philosopher H. Dooyeweerd are also helpful in developing a rich approach to creation while avoiding unhelpful anthropomorphism. Dooyeweerd’s philosophy has three major building blocks: particular entities (this tree), fifteen modal aspects (how entities function), and individuality structures (God’s order for entities). He argues that, as God has ordered the world, every entity functions in all fifteen modal aspects: Arithmetic—Spatial—Kinematic—Physical—Biotic—Sensitive—Logical—Historical—Lingual—Social—Economic—Aesthetic—Juridical—Ethical—Pistic. Thus, the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of a butterfly are not imaginary but real, and are part of what it means for a butterfly to be a butterfly! V. Nabokov’s description of standing among rare butterflies fits with reality: “This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which

34. Lopez, *Home Ground*, xxiii.

35. *Ibid.*, xxii–xxiii.

36. For the negative significance of Descartes’s philosophy for animals, see Shevelov, *For the Love of Animals*, 27–32.

37. Buber, *I and Thou*.

is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humouring a lucky mortal.”³⁸

Yet, Dooyeweerd explains, although entities function in all fifteen modes, they may not function as a *subject* in all modes; in some they may function *objectively*. Thus a plant functions as a subject in all modes up to and including the biotic and as an object in the remaining modes. Thus a tree is a living organism, and its qualifying mode—the biotic—gives it its distinctive character as a plant. A tree cannot speak or name other objects, but its function in the lingual mode means that part of creation is the capacity for humans to *name* trees. A tree will not admire the beauty of other trees, but its functioning in the aesthetic mode means that its beauty is not imaginary; it is real and able to be recognized and relished by humans.

This nonreductionistic approach is very helpful as we consider the role of plants and animals in place. Intriguingly, in volume 3 of his *New Critique of Theoretical Thought* Dooyeweerd discusses “this budding linden before my window,”³⁹ noting that by focusing his theoretical attention on the linden tree he is already engaged in abstraction, because things are never experienced—as opposed to being analyzed—in isolation, but are interlaced with everything else. Dooyeweerd notes that the tree functions as a subject in all modes up to and including the biotic, which is its qualifying mode. A purely mathematical-physical analysis would eliminate its typical structure as an individual whole and replace this whole with a system of interacting energy functions. Crucially for our purposes, Dooyeweerd insists that the reality of the linden tree is not completed in the biotic mode; it has object functions in the remaining modes, which are as real as the subject functions. So, for example, in the linguistic mode it has the potential for being symbolically signified. Aesthetically it has the potential for being appreciated as beautiful. Socially trees have amazing potential for providing the place for human interaction. And pistically we can see (or not) the tree as part of God’s magnificent creation. Central to the opening up of these objective modes is the relationship of humans to the rest of the creation.

Creation and Natural History

The sheer goodness of birds, fish, animals, land, sky, and sea alerts us firstly to the respect owed them as part of the creation. Sadly much of human history is a record of cruelty and abuse toward animals. As early as AD 375 Basil of Caesarea could pray, “Oh, God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers the animals to whom Thou gavest the

38. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, quoted in Mynott, *Birdscapes*, 96.

39. Dooyeweerd, *New Critique*, 3, 54.

earth in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of man with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to thee in song, has been a groan of travail.”⁴⁰ John Wesley found a “plausible objection against the justice of God, in suffering numberless creatures that had never sinned to be so severely punished.” He speculates on whether “[God’s] mercy might await mistreated animals on the other side.”⁴¹ It was nineteenth-century Christian reformers who founded the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and its American counterpart,⁴² but too many Christians appear to have lost such concern today. In his remarkable book *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, M. Scully documents relentlessly the contemporary abuse of animals, in which they are reduced to units of consumption, and he does so within a rich Christian framework. It is chilling reading. The industrialization of the food system means that abuse of animals has multiplied exponentially.

Secondly, the goodness of God’s creatures alerts us to the ways in which they reflect God’s handiwork. This is expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:39: “God has provided variety in nature; *thus not every kind of flesh is the same flesh, but there is one kind for men, another for beasts, another for birds, and another for fish.*”⁴³ These creatures evoke respectful exploration by their fellow creature humankind. There is not space here to explore the comprehensive range of natural history, the usual name for such exploration. In what follows I have focused on the example of birds and place, but I could as easily have attended to the earth, the sky,⁴⁴ the sea,⁴⁵ fish,⁴⁶ animals other than birds,

40. Basil of Caesarea, quoted in Scully, *Dominion*, 13.

41. John Wesley, quoted in *ibid.*, 14.

42. See Harwood, *Love for Animals and How It Developed in Great Britain*; Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*; Phelps, *The Longest Struggle*; Shevelov, *For the Love of Animals*.

43. Barrett, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 371. Emphasis original.

44. See Pretor-Pinney, *Cloudspotter’s Guide*, for an intriguing recovery of cloud spotting and appreciation in the United Kingdom today.

45. The sea/oceans deserve mention, as they constitute 71 percent of the earth’s surface and have only recently begun to be explored. The major figure behind exploration of the oceans was Jacques Cousteau (1910–97). In a chapter of *The Human, the Orchid, and the Octopus*, 116–29, Cousteau reflects on “the Holy Scriptures and the environment.” A lifelong Roman Catholic, Cousteau defends Scripture against the charge that it supports brutal mastery of nature, but poignantly asks, “How many of these people rise to their feet or fall to their knees in cathedrals . . . all the while ignoring the living word of God just outside the window? . . . They choose to believe in a God who has issued divine commands; how many honor His divine commands to safeguard the environment?” (117).

46. One might think that fish are unable to develop relationships with humans. See in this respect the extraordinary story of Ulysses, a grouper of about sixty pounds who attached himself to Jacques Cousteau and his team of deep-sea divers. Cousteau notes that “Ulysses became our inseparable friend. He followed us everywhere, sometimes nibbling our fins” (*The Living Sea*, 157).

or plants. The story of human discovery in all these areas, and of wonder, shameful disrespect, use and abuse, is a fascinating and disconcerting story.⁴⁷

Birds: “Let Birds Multiply on the Earth” (Genesis 1:22)

Bird-watchers are great at making lists, and intriguingly the earliest list of birds is found in an ancient Sumerian text, the *Nanše*, which uses one hundred different words for birds and from which some thirty-one varieties can be identified.⁴⁸ Perhaps this is the sort of thing Genesis 1 has in mind with Adam naming the animals? Part of Solomon’s internationally renowned wisdom was that he was well informed about trees—from the cedars of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall!—and about animals, birds, reptiles, and fish (1 Kings 4:33).

Mynott notes that “any evocation of a place may miss a crucial aspect if it does not include in the account of its natural setting some reference to its characteristic bird life.”⁴⁹ The Bible certainly does not fall short in this area. Multiple passages, especially in the Psalter, speak of God’s concern for birds,⁵⁰ and significantly, a regular feature of judgment upon a place,⁵¹ especially in Jeremiah, is the absence of birds and birdsong. In the New Testament, birds play a significant role. In his moving book on the grassland birds of North America and the threat they are under, Herriot observes,

The summer-ending song of a bird that very likely failed to raise any young this year cries out to a more perfect fidelity dwelling in this land that marks the sparrow’s fall. In the gospel . . . Jesus tells peasants of Galilee that not a single sparrow falls to the ground without God’s knowing and caring. Our ancestors came to this land with that gospel and many others consoling them as they stripped the prairie of its sod, and fought against drought, grasshoppers, and early frosts. . . . God knows the sparrow. The land knows the sparrow. The trick of remaining here is to become a people who know the sparrow too, who will not give up on creatures who ask only for a place in the grass.⁵²

In explaining to his disciples that the kingdom of God is present in his ministry, Jesus draws an analogy between that kingdom and the small black mustard seed, which becomes the greatest of shrubs and in whose branches the birds of the air can dwell (*kataskēnōn*).⁵³ The parable evokes the full manifesta-

47. Books I have found helpful include Gribbin and Gribbin, *Flower Hunters*; Stocks, *Forgotten Fruits*; Gollner, *Fruit Hunters*; Safina, *Song for the Blue Ocean*; Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*.

48. Veldhuis, *Religion, Literature, and Scholarship*.

49. Mynott, *Birdscapes*, 204. Hillel’s useful *Natural History of the Bible* is an example in this respect; birds are not listed in his index.

50. Pss. 50:11; 104:12, 17; 148:10; Isa. 31:5; Ezek. 17:23; 31:6; Dan. 2:38; 4:21; Hosea 2:18.

51. Eccles. 12:4; Jer. 4:25; 9:10; 12:4; Hosea 4:3; Zeph. 1:3.

52. Herriot, *Grass, Sky, Song*, 69.

53. Matt. 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–19. On this parable see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 216–28.

tion of the kingdom in the creation; “birds” are often taken to represent the gentiles,⁵⁴ but a more literal interpretation is possible which does not minimize the metaphorical dimensions of the parable. The kingdom will ultimately bring harmony to the creation, in which even the birds of the sky will dwell at peace.

Creation evokes wonder and exploration, and it has been a pleasant surprise to discover the central role of Christians in natural history. In his enchanting *The Wisdom of Birds: An Illustrated History of Ornithology*, ornithologist T. Birkhead argues that the most influential ornithologist of all time was the Englishman John Ray (1627–1705).

Ray spearheaded a new vision of the natural world, and he did so with a gentle modesty that belied a brilliant mind and wonderful clarity of vision. . . . Ray’s God was responsible for the natural world in all its beauty and in particular the wonderful fit between an animal and its environment—something he called physico-theology (later known as natural theology) and what we today call adaptation. The culmination of his life’s work, *The Wisdom of God*, published in 1691, laid out Ray’s ideas in brilliant, readable style. In its day, physico-theology was as significant as Darwin’s natural selection would be one hundred and fifty years later.⁵⁵

A devout Christian, Ray, by developing a definition of what constitutes a species, initiated a nomenclature that inspired Carl Linnaeus sixty years later. His physico-theology provided a conceptual framework for ornithology, and his *Wisdom* initiated the study of birds in their natural environments. Although a less attractive character than John Ray, Linnaeus (1707–78) also “regarded the study of nature as God’s work.”⁵⁶

Birds play a significant role in the fourth-most published book in English, Gilbert White’s *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne, in the County of Southampton*, published in 1788.⁵⁷ White was a clergyman, and the book has been called “the journal of Adam in Paradise.”⁵⁸ D. E. Allen says of it, “For it is, surely, the testament of Static Man: at peace with the world and with himself, content with deepening his knowledge of his one small corner of the earth, a being suspended in a perfect mental balance. Selborne is the secret, private parish inside each one of us.”⁵⁹ White was fascinated by bird migration and loved swallows and martins in particular.

In a scientist like John Ray there was no contradiction between wonder and analysis. As science developed it became increasingly reductionistic, so that a tension developed between wonder and joy on the one hand and analysis on the

54. Snodgrass thinks this unlikely (*Stories with Intent*, 224).

55. Birkhead, *Wisdom of Birds*, 8–9.

56. Gribbin and Gribbin, *Flower Hunters*, 30. See also 29–66.

57. It is still in print, published by Thames and Hudson.

58. Mynott, *Birdscapes*, 191.

59. D. E. Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain*, quoted in Mynott, *Birdscapes*, 191.

other. Thus, in Mynott's wonderful *Birdscapes* one feels throughout the book a tension between his love of birds and the fear of anthropomorphism.⁶⁰ Above, we explained a way of resolving this issue without resorting to inappropriate anthropomorphism. In contemporary natural history there has developed, encouragingly, an openness to the transcendent in nature. In his acclaimed *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez describes the effect of his evening walks among the tundra birds while he was camped in the western Brooks Range of Alaska: "I took to bowing on these evening walks. I would bow slightly with my hands in my pockets, toward the birds and the evidence of life in their nests—because of their fecundity, unexpected in this remote region, and because of the serene arctic light that came down over the land like breath, like breathing."⁶¹

In terms of place, bird-watching and ornithology are significant because of the attentiveness to the particular that they require:

Anyone who watches a particular patch regularly becomes very sensitive to all the gradual and small changes going on throughout the year. . . . Every bird has both its daily and seasonal rhythms and so therefore do the places they inhabit. . . . The whole country [the UK] is a mosaic of local patches that are watched intently, not for the great rarities that may occasionally turn up or for general scientific hypothesising but for the daily variations in the ordinary and the particular. . . . A good part of the pleasure comes from trying to ask the right questions of the place and starting to piece together the answers.⁶²

Unsurprisingly, birders visit familiar places most of the time because "awareness depends on a prior sensitivity to place."⁶³ Local patches can be almost anywhere. What they have in common is that they are familiar to and known intimately by someone and that that person feels attached to them, all of which emerge from close observation over time. As Mynott notes, "The important point here, I think, . . . is the relish in the ordinary and the particular."⁶⁴ "In all these ways a bird may be the one thing we most associate with a place, the genius loci, and we can no longer think of either the bird or the place without the other."⁶⁵

Suburban life discourages precisely such attentiveness, not to mention the effects of such a lifestyle on the plant, bird, and animal life.⁶⁶ Indeed the destructive effects of sprawl feed a growing inattentiveness and vice versa. Genesis 1 speaks of birds multiplying "on the earth," and in his *Grass, Sky, Song* T. Herriot focuses on grassland birds in North America, those that depend on grassy habitat

60. Mynott, *Birdscapes*, 23–27, 43, 112, 147, 180, 267, 289–96, 301–2.

61. Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, xx.

62. Mynott, *Birdscapes*, 194–96.

63. *Ibid.*, 197.

64. *Ibid.*, 198.

65. *Ibid.*, 206.

66. See Johnson and Klemens, *Nature in Fragments*, for the effects of sprawl and strategies to counteract them.

for their survival. They are declining faster than any other on the continent.⁶⁷ For Herriot, “It’s a fool’s dream, but a part of me can’t stop imagining that if enough people would discover all that is good and holy in these birds, we might be able to turn things around before it’s too late.”⁶⁸ He says of his drawings and writing that “each story, argument, species profile, and drawing was conceived within a longing to reclaim the original spirit of grassland that survives yet in its birds. Beneath that longing lie the deeper human wish we all share: to find out how we might belong to a place, to find a way home.”⁶⁹

It is only through attentiveness that we will discover all that is good and holy in “these birds,” and the place to start is where we are. Doing what we can to make our suburban plots attractive to birds would go a long way to recovering the good and holy in them. And as we make place for them, they will call us back into place. And in the process we may be surprised by the openness of wild animals to living in relationship with humans. Herriot describes Edgar’s experience with chickadees in Central Butte, Saskatchewan:

In the fall of ’26 he got to know some chickadees on the property. One was cheekier than the rest, brave enough to come to his outstretched hand and get bread crumbs. Within a week he had five chickadees all over his head and shoulders. They’d ride to the barn with him and in the morning when he went out to do chores he’d give a whistle, imitating their song, and they would come to greet him.

The birds disappeared for a spell, but the next fall he was out with a friend hunting rabbits and the friend said, “Edgar, there’s a bird riding on your gun barrel.” Edgar gave the whistle and four more chickadees came out of the bush to join the one on his rifle. He hadn’t seen them for months and he was half a mile away from the yard where he’d been feeding them, but they still knew Edgar, and responded to this call.⁷⁰

Genesis 2–3: Implacement and Displacement

Genesis 1 is universal in its scope, with a developing focus on the whole earth as humankind’s home, whereas, as we will see, Genesis 2–3 is place specific in its focus.

Genesis 2: Implacement

The debate about the relationship between Genesis 1:1–2:4a and chapters 2–3 is well known. Source criticism has identified two different creation stories,

67. Herriot, *Grass, Sky, Song*, 2.

68. *Ibid.*, 3.

69. *Ibid.*, 4.

70. *Ibid.*, 62–63.

with 1:1–2:3 identified as part of a tradition called P, for “priestly,” after its supposed priestly redactors, and Genesis 2–3 as part of a tradition called J, for “Jahwist/Yahwist,” because in that tradition God is referred to by the name Yahweh. Scholars continue to wrestle with the relationship between the two stories. Undoubtedly there are important differences between them; canonically, however, and in terms of the literary shape of Genesis 1–11, it is important to note the literary juxtaposition of these two narratives and the consequent relationship between them.⁷¹

The *toledoth* headings (“These are the generations of”) structure Genesis as a literary unit, and it is significant that 1:1–2:3 stands outside this literary shaping, whereas 2–4 is the first major section under a toledoth heading.⁷² Genesis 1:1–2:3, therefore, functions as an introduction to Genesis as a whole, whereas chapters 2–3 initiate the story that will lead on to Abraham and Israel. “The role of the toledoth formula in 2.4, which introduces the story of mankind, is to connect the creation of the world with the history which follows.”⁷³ The genre of chapters 1–11 is much debated, but this much can surely be said: chapters 2–3 have more of a historical function within Genesis than does 1:1–2:3.⁷⁴

In terms of the perplexing relationship between these creation stories, place is once again illuminating. We noted above that Genesis 1 presents the earth as a *potential* place for humans; it is depicted as an ideal home. We also noted the progressive placial differentiation. In Genesis 2 this differentiation is taken a step forward. Indeed 2:4b, with its inversion of “heavens and the earth”⁷⁵ to “earth and the heavens,” signals the shift in focus to the earth.⁷⁶ Genesis 2 becomes far more placially specific with its focus on Eden as the garden in which Adam and Eve are to dwell. As Von Rad notes of J’s account of creation, “It is altogether a much smaller area with which the narrator deals—not even the ‘earth,’ but the world that lies at man’s own doorstep—garden, rivers, trees, language, animals, and woman.”⁷⁷ “P is concerned with the ‘world’ and man within it, while J shows the construction of man’s immediate environment and defines his relationship to it.”⁷⁸ Yahweh Elohim plants a garden in Eden, and there he places the man he has formed

71. Cf. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 149–50.

72. With G. J. Wenham (*Genesis 1–15*, 49, 55–56), I take 2:4 to be a heading for what follows in chaps. 2–4.

73. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 146.

74. See G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 53–55. In the history of modern Old Testament scholarship the Old Testament emphasis on history has unhelpfully and wrongly been set against nature.

75. Cf. Gen. 1:1; 2:1; 2:4a.

76. As Barth notes, “The heavens are not overlooked or denied, but in this saga attention is focused on the earth” (*Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 234).

77. Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:148.

78. *Ibid.*, 150.

of dust from the ground. In this sense Genesis 2 represents a *continuation* of the place differentiation in Genesis 1.

Narratively, therefore, the move from Genesis 1 to 2, rather than indicating a juxtaposition of two unrelated sources, involves a movement of progressive implacement culminating in the planting of Eden as the specific place in which the earthlings Adam and Eve will dwell. It is important to note just how illuminating place is at this point. Genesis 1 presents the world as a *potential* place for human habitation, but the nature of Adam and Eve as embodied earthlings means that the human story itself must begin in a specific place, in this case Eden. As Casey notes, “Implacement itself, *being concretely placed*, is intrinsically particular.”⁷⁹

The Hebrew word for humankind in 1:26–28, namely *’ādām*, already creates the closest connection between humankind and the earth, with its association with *’ādāmâ* (= cultivable ground).⁸⁰ True, the word used for the earth as a whole in Genesis 1 is *’ereṣ*; in 2:7, however, Yahweh Elohim forms *’ādām* out of the *’ādāmâ*, and in Eden it is out of the *’ādāmâ* that Yahweh Elohim causes trees to grow which are aesthetically pleasing and nutritionally satisfying. Throughout 2:5–3:24 *’ādāmâ* is used for Eden and *’ereṣ* does not occur. “Earthling”⁸¹ is therefore an apt description of human beings, since it points clearly to the embodied nature of human being. Hiebert notes, “Not only does *’ādām* cultivate *’ādāmâ*, he is fashioned by God out of the land he farms.”⁸² This link between *’ādām* and *’ādāmâ* alerts us to the fact that human embodiment and place are deeply interwoven and in practice inseparable.

The creaturely embodiment of human beings makes placement unavoidable. Embodied human life implies specific place, and the ordering of the content of Genesis 2 after that of chapter 1 exemplifies this. Human habitation can never straddle the whole earth; it is of necessity specific, and in Genesis 2 that means the garden which God plants, namely Eden. Place names begin to accumulate in Genesis 2—Eden, Pishon, Havilah, Gihon, Tigris, and Assyria—and this again indicates the differentiation toward a specific place: “Place-names embody this complex collective concreteness despite their considerable brevity.”⁸³

Genesis 2 thus begins the story of human history with the implacement of Adam and Eve in a specific place. “Here” and “there” are placial terms,⁸⁴ and in this respect the *šām* (there) of 2:8 is significant, carrying all the weight of implacement: “To dwell means to belong to a given place.”⁸⁵ The place in mind is “a garden in Eden, in the east” (2:8). We are not told much about this

79. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 23. Emphasis original.

80. Hiebert, *Yahwist’s Landscape*, 34–35.

81. Wurst, “Beloved, Come Back to Me,” 92, 106.

82. Hiebert, *Yahwist’s Landscape*, 35.

83. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 23.

84. *Ibid.*, 50–56.

85. Norberg-Schulz, *Concept of Dwelling*, quoted in Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 109.

garden other than that it is fertile and has a variety of trees; aesthetically it is pleasing, and a river flows out of it so that it is well irrigated.⁸⁶ The result of this minimal information is that we easily read into Eden our own experience of gardens or the Romantic notion of untamed wilderness. What *should* we imagine when we think of Eden?

Firstly we should think of a specific place. As Barth notes, “The biblical witness is speaking of a definite place on earth.”⁸⁷ Wenham explores the symbolic value of Eden as a place where God dwells; indeed several features of the garden liken it to a sanctuary. However, he rightly asserts that “the mention of the rivers and their location in vv 10–14 suggests that the final editor of Gen 2 thought of Eden as a real place, even if it is beyond the wit of modern writers to locate.”⁸⁸ This assertion is strengthened by the toledoth context in which chapters 2–3 occur, signaling the unfolding *history* of humankind. Furthermore, as we have noted, the move in chapters 1–3 is from heavens and earth, to earth, to the garden. The setting in 2:5–8 suggests a Mesopotamian site for Eden.⁸⁹

But what kind of garden is Eden? The details in chapter 2 are sparse. God plants the garden and makes all kinds of trees grow in it, trees for food and those that are aesthetically pleasing.⁹⁰ The garden is well irrigated, an attractive prospect in the arid East. The Hebrew word translated “Eden” probably derives from its homonym, a word meaning “pleasure, delight,” indicating the abundance of provision and the fertility of the garden.⁹¹

D. C. Benjamin notes that the legacy of a Romantic perspective is the tendency to interpret Eden as an unspoiled wilderness.⁹² In his view “it is more likely that the Eden in the story of Adam is a landscaped garden or urban masterpiece than an undeveloped wilderness or a geological wonder.”⁹³ C. Tuplin, however, thinks the description of the garden of Eden is modest and in line with the other gardens mentioned in the Old Testament.⁹⁴ It is hard to be sure of the ancient Near Eastern background to chapter 2.⁹⁵ Gardens were an important part of the irrigation economies of Mesopotamia and Egypt; in the case of wealthy and influential persons the garden could be

86. The description of Eden, with its irrigation by river, is reminiscent of the river valley civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, where agriculture depended on flooding by rivers and on irrigation systems connected to the rivers.

87. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 252.

88. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 61–62.

89. *Ibid.*, 66. Cf. Hiebert, who argues that the Yahwist has in mind the Jordan Valley oasis of the past (*Yahwist’s Landscape*, 52–59).

90. Only three trees are specifically identified: the common fig (3:7) and the two special trees.

91. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 61.

92. Benjamin, “Stories of Adam and Eve,” 43.

93. *Ibid.*, 43–44.

94. Tuplin, *Achaemenid Studies*, 81.

95. Cf. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 51–53.

expansive and generally adjoined the residence. The ancient Egyptians also cultivated gardens, orchards, and parks, and wealthy families often maintained country estates where the owners could relax amidst flowers, fruit trees, and ponds.

Within the Old Testament, Yahweh Elohim's planting of a garden may be comparable with Qohelet's⁹⁶ planting vineyards, making gardens and parks, and making pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. This would fit with the imaginative portrayal of Qohelet as King Solomon in Ecclesiastes and the description of the projects of kings in the ancient Near East.⁹⁷ That it was generally the wealthier who owned gardens affirms the monarchical dimension, albeit democratized, of the *imago Dei* as presented in Genesis 1.

What is clear on all accounts is that a garden was an enclosed area designed for cultivation.⁹⁸ This background casts interesting light on Eden as a place for human habitation. What we have, then, rather than an image of primitivism, is one of an area that is bounded, probably by walls; carefully landscaped; and intensively cultivated with orchards and the like. In the light of its urban connotations in the ancient Near East, Eden may well have included buildings.⁹⁹ Thus God as King, a central image of God in Genesis 1, plants a garden, and as the under-kings, Adam and Eve dwell in the garden, which is their royal residence.¹⁰⁰

And thus, secondly we should note that Eden is a garden characterized by cultivation.¹⁰¹ This fits precisely with Yahweh Elohim putting Adam and Eve into Eden in order to “till it and keep it” (2:15). Hiebert suggests that the animals are created to help Adam with the challenging task of cultivation. Similarly he argues that the woman is created to be a helper *like Adam* so that the family unit, the very basis of agricultural society, can be set up.¹⁰² A translation of *bd* (NRSV = till) is “to serve,”¹⁰³ and this helpfully undermines any sense of brutal mastery over the garden. The verb *šāmar* (keep) is regularly used in the Old Testament for keeping God's laws; in Jeremiah 5:24 it refers to God's “keeping” of the weeks for the harvest. Thus it too evokes the sense of attentive, careful, obedient cultivation. “We get back into place—dwelling place—by the cultivation of built places. Such cultivation *localizes caring*. What is for Heidegger a global feature of existent human

96. *Qohelet* is the Hebrew word for “Teacher,” used to refer to the writer of Ecclesiastes (1:1).

97. See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 151.

98. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 61.

99. Contra the tendency to portray the narrative arc of Scripture as the move from a garden to a city.

100. For an alternate view see Hiebert, *Yahwist's Landscape*, 61.

101. Cf. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 155.

102. Hiebert, *Yahwist's Landscape*, 60.

103. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 67.

being—namely, ‘care’ (*Sorge*)—is here given a local habitation and not just a name. We care about places as well as people so that we can say that *caring belongs to places*.¹⁰⁴

Casey notes that the gardens he analyzes do not normally offer permanent dwellings,¹⁰⁵ but here the ancient Near Eastern background is instructive, since gardens in those cultures were linked to royal residences. Clearly in Eden the dwelling is *hestial*,¹⁰⁶ in the sense that Adam and Eve dwell there. Gardens evoke a mood that is peculiarly suited for sociality, contemplation, and reflection. This resonates with 3:8, where Adam and Eve “heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.” The garden is not just a place for the production of vegetables, fruits, and herbs; it is also a place of intimacy, contemplation, and familial solidarity.¹⁰⁷ Wenham has noted how Eden is depicted as a sanctuary,¹⁰⁸ and this fits with the intimate relationship pictured here with God. The unusual use of “Yahweh Elohim” as the name for God in chapters 2–3 alerts us to the relationship with God in which Adam and Eve participate.¹⁰⁹ It also—by juxtaposing *Yahweh*, God’s name as redeemer, with *Elohim*, his name as creator—thoroughly undermines the dichotomies between creation and nature and between redemption and history that have prevented Old Testament scholars from excavating the powerful Old Testament vision of nature and place, and have opened the Bible to the charge that it is the cause of the modern environmental crisis.¹¹⁰ “Yahweh,” above all else the name of the God who redeems Israel (cf. Exod. 3; 6), is juxtaposed with “Elohim,” the name for the creator God of Genesis 1, in order to alert the reader that *their* God is the creator of the heavens and the earth.

Thirdly we should note that we are presented in Genesis 2, as in chapter 1, with a *theology* of place. In the words of Genesis 13:10, this is “the garden of the LORD.” The tree of life is at the center of the garden. In Scripture trees are a symbol of the life of God, and “the tree of life is an essential mark of a perfect garden in which God dwells.”¹¹¹ The tree in the midst of the garden signifies that the garden is God’s sanctuary: “While He gives man the enjoyment of the whole Garden and all its trees, by the planting of the tree of life in its midst God declares that his primary, central and decisive will is to give him Himself.”¹¹² Significantly for place, Barth asserts that “God grants him

104. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 175. Emphasis original.

105. *Ibid.*, 169.

106. Casey distinguishes between hermetic and hestial dwelling (*Getting Back into Place*, 2nd ed., 140–55). *Hestial* relates to the “intimacy and memorability of domestic space” (140).

107. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 158.

108. G. J. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism.”

109. L’Hour, “Yahweh Elohim.”

110. See Hiebert, *Yahwist’s Landscape*, 3–22.

111. G. J. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism,” 62.

112. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 282.

His own presence, i.e., Himself as the Co-inhabitant of *this place*.¹¹³ From this perspective place is never fully place without God as a co-inhabitant.

Approaching Genesis 1 and 2 through the prism of place is fecund. It not only enables us to avoid some of the dualisms of contemporary readings but also illuminates the logical connection between Genesis 1 and 2, and in the process allows us to see the centrality of place for human identity and being.

Genesis 3: Displacement

Much has been written about Genesis 3. Suffice it to note here that place once again enables us to gain fresh insight into the condition of fallenness that Genesis 3 portrays. Note should be taken here of Robert Harrison’s bizarre reading of Genesis 2–3 in his otherwise helpful book *Gardens*. He describes Eden as a “garden of ennui,”¹¹⁴ a place of fruits without flowers and one in which a “frozen, temporally suspended nature reigned.”¹¹⁵ What Hannah Arendt called “natality”¹¹⁶—the initiation of new beginnings through human activity—was, according to Harrison, denied the first couple in Eden and only became possible as a result of Eve’s transgression. Eve is the hero of the story; her “transgression was the first true instance of human action, properly understood.”¹¹⁷

In the spirit of the post-Enlightenment this is truly a serpentine reading of Genesis 2–3. As we have seen, Eden was a garden of delight, the ideal home for the first couple, seasonal and full of potential for natality, albeit—and this is where it contradicts Harrison—subject to the winsome rule of the Creator. The fall is not a quest for natality and fecundity but for *autonomy*, and this death is not the condition of natality but its destruction.

Human identity is deeply bound up with place, and in Genesis 3 *displacement* is at the heart of God’s judgment. Genesis 3 concludes with the damning indictment: “Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man” (vv. 23–24a). The prior judgment pronounced on the man in 3:17–19 also amounts to displacement: humankind’s relationship to the ground, that is, his experience of place, will be transformed. Cultivation will be in danger of radical misdirection from care to abuse. The thorns and thistles which the ground will produce are indicative of ecological destruction: “With agriculture there begins the paradoxical history of human destruction of the Earth’s fertility in the very search for productive land.”¹¹⁸

113. *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

114. Harrison, *Gardens*, 15.

115. *Ibid.*, 16.

116. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8–9, 177–78, 191, 247.

117. *Ibid.*, 15.

118. Newsom, “Common Ground,” 70.

With the modern suppression of place and our speed-driven societies, it is hard to grasp the horror of this judgment. However, in the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern context there would have been a far greater sense of the angst associated with placelessness. If Genesis 2 and 3 were written around the time of the exile, then readers would have a keen sense of the pain of *this* exile, imaging as it does their being vomited out of the land. Casey observes that “landscape itself, usually a most accommodating presence, can alienate us. (Lyotard goes so far as to assert that ‘estrangement (*dépaysement*) would appear to be a precondition for landscape.’) Entire cultures can become profoundly averse to the places they inhabit, feeling atopic and displaced within their own implacement.”¹¹⁹ Genesis 1–3 alerts us to the fact that estrangement or displacement is not, as Lyotard suggests, a precondition for landscape. But what the above quote rightly notes is that in their fallen condition, not-being-at-home is a constant challenge for human beings. “Displacement within their own implacement” captures vividly the challenge that will now face humankind. Placement is unavoidable—it is part of the human condition—but to be at rest in their placement will from now on be an entirely different story.

However, among biblical scholars the relationship between chapters 2–3 and the rest of the Old Testament is disputed. C. Westermann concludes that there is no tradition of the narrative of Genesis 2–3 throughout the whole of the Old Testament. It is neither quoted nor mentioned.¹²⁰ Awareness of place is again revealing at this point. Contra Westermann, as a story of displacement, Genesis 2–3 is fundamental to the entire Old Testament and presupposed at every point. The quest for landedness will form the heart of the narrative that follows 2–3. Chapters 2–3 may not be quoted or “mentioned,” but once we become aware of the centrality of place in the Old Testament, it becomes clear that Westermann’s approach, which looks for quotes or specific mention, is inadequate. These two chapters may be of late origin and were perhaps crafted during the exile—this may be one reason for a lack of specific quotes and mention. However, in the context of the canon as a whole the connection between chapters 2–3 and what follows in the Old Testament is clear.

Conclusion

Approaching Genesis 1–3 through the prism of place is remarkably fertile both for solving long-standing problems in Old Testament criticism and for developing a theology of place. Genesis 1 is a *place* story, with all that that involves, and not just an earth story. And whereas Genesis 1 is universal in its scope, focusing increasingly on the earth as potential place, Genesis 2 begins the human story in a particular place, namely Eden.

119. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 34.

120. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 276.

In terms of biblical theology, as Genesis 1–3 makes clear, for humans to say “God” is to be implaced, and insofar as *place* evokes—as it clearly does—the nexus God, place, and humankind, it would be quite right to see place as a major contender for the central theme of biblical faith, Scripture moving, as it does, from Eden (an urban-style garden) via the land of Israel and the cultic center of Jerusalem, to the incarnate Jesus, to the city of the new Jerusalem, which is central to the new heavens and earth. Redemption, examined through the prism of place, has the structure of implacement–displacement–(re)implacement.

In terms of a theology of place, Genesis 1–3 is rich and foundational. Its central insights are as follows:

1. Creation is the basis for place and not some neutral concept of nature.
2. As embodied creatures in the *imago Dei*, humans are always dated and *located*, that is, *placed*. As a metaphor the *imago Dei* alerts us to the similarities and differences between God and us, and our placedness is one of the differences.
3. Place is a rich, dense phenomenon. Among other things, Genesis 1–3 alerts us to its aesthetic, social, historical, agrarian, and urban dimensions.
4. God intends for humans to be at home in, to indwell, their places. Place and implacement is a gift and provides the possibility for imaging God in his creation. Place is thus a dynamic concept evoking the creative engagement of humans with their contexts.
5. Place is never fully place without God as co-inhabitant. Place is thus always, in one way or another, a theological concept.
6. After Eden the challenge of implacement and the danger of displacement are a constant part of the human condition. Humans remain placed, but displacement is a constant threat.