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Carol J. Dempsey

University of Portland, dempsey@up.edu

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Crops, Gardens, and Landscapes: A Prophetic Tool

Carol J. Dempsey, OP

One of the hallmarks of the prophetic texts in the Bible is the natural world the biblical authors use as a tool to express impending peril, to highlight devastation that has occurred because of human transgression, and to signal that restoration—not devastation—is the final word in the divine economy and vision for a transformed world. From a hermeneutical perspective the writings of the prophets communicate the idea that a relationship exists between the natural world and people. Sometimes this relationship has positive effects for both aspects of life; at other times it has horrific effects for both parties. The one point that remains clear is this: both human beings and the natural world are a part of creation, and what happens to one usually has an effect on the other since everything that exists is part of the wondrous web of life.

For ancient Israel, sin and suffering were linked. Fidelity to God, the keeping of the covenant, and the living out of Torah led to a life of divine blessing. This life of blessing included security in the city and field, offspring, a full harvest of fruit from both the ground and livestock, an increase in cattle and flocks, and the defeat of insurgent enemies. In essence, all of life would be prosperous (Deut 28:1-14). If, however, the people were unfaithful to God, if they broke covenant, and if they disregarded Torah, then life for the Israelites would be cursed by God. This divine curse would have a negative effect on the people, their crops, their gardens, their livestock, and their landscapes—their entire earthly habitat (Deut 28:15–29:1).

This theology of blessings and curses is part of the fabric of the writings of the prophets and becomes another tool in the hand of the biblical writers who shaped the prophetic texts in the postexilic Persian period when Israel was resettling in the land and redefining itself as a community. This article looks at how the biblical writers use the tools of their craft—a particular



Quant dieu ot fait le ciel
 et la terre et les caues
 douces et salces et le
 soleil et la lune et tou
 tes les estoilles et il ot
 a chascun comande selo
 son ordre. Cest a dire que le soleil luisist
 le iour et enluminaist par sa grant clarte

tout le monde. Et la lune et les estoilles
 rendissent luminaire et clarte ala nuit
 qui estoit tenebreuse. et obscure et noire
 Il fist les orscauv en air. Et les poissone
 es caues. Et les bestes en terre de toutes
 manieres. par sa seule parole. Et si fist
 les arbres fruit portez. et semence. et les
 herbes vertes plusans et belles de divers

theology and the natural world environment—to provide a wake-up call and a word of hope for their own community and for worldwide communities today.

“The Wine Dries Up; The Vine Languishes” (Isaiah 24:1-13)

Within the prophetic corpus, Isaiah 24:1-13 presents a harrowing vision of what is about to take place because of the choices some Israelites have made. In verses 1-3, the first unit, the poet proclaims that God is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate. In verse 2 the poet catalogs six pairs of people who will be affected by the impending divine action. No class, religious group, or gender will escape divine judgment. The prophetic word goes forth:

The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled;
for the Lord has spoken this word. (Isa 24:3)

Collectively, verses 1-3 stress that both the land and all sorts of people are going to suffer for reasons yet unknown.

The second unit (vv. 4-20) opens with the poet’s vision of the land’s mourning and withering, and highlights the cause of the land’s impending devastation:

The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant. (Isa 24:4-5)

The polluted earth is the land that will be drenched in blood from the impending Assyrian invasion and the devastation of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The everlasting covenant recalls those covenants made with Noah, Abraham, David, and the Israelite people (cf. Jer 32:40; Ezek 16:60). The covenant to which the poet of Isaiah 24:1-13 refers is not one single covenant, but rather a cosmic one. Because this cosmic covenant has been broken, divine judgment will be cosmic. The poet has now brought to the fore the relationship that exists between the suffering of the earth and humankind’s sinfulness.

Scenes from Creation, illumination, First Master of the Bible historiale of Jean de Berry, about 1390–1400. The J. Paul Getty Museum.

Verses 6-12 develop the images introduced in verses 1-5. A curse will devour the earth, people will perish, merriment will stop, and wine will cease to flow because the vine languishes. Under the sting of divine judgment even the vineyards will be mortally affected.

The cosmic portrayal of suffering becomes the topic of verse 13. Here the poet summarizes what is to occur, and with imagery chosen from the natural world tries to highlight for the listeners the severity of the forth-

coming devastation that will engulf the entire earth and all its inhabitants. The image of the devastated vineyard, hinted at in verse 7 by the images of the absence of wine and the languishing vine, serves as a warning to the people that the “good times” are soon to be ended, that life will be

Neither violence nor punishment can change hearts.

forever changed, and that merrymaking, jubilation, and mirth are about to give way to devastation, desolation, and lamentation. All of this chaos will occur because of the people’s own bad choices and infidelities (v. 5).

In the context of Isaiah 1-39, this passage functions as a warning about what is to occur if the people do not change their ways. History bears out that the people did not repent; the Assyrians—seen metaphorically as the rod of God’s anger and the embodiment of God’s fury (Isa 10:5)—eventually did invade the land, turning the Northern Kingdom of Israel into a heap of rubble. From a postexilic perspective Isaiah 24:1-13 captures the memory of the trauma of the devastating Assyrian invasion and reminds later listeners and readers that the destiny of one another’s lives and the fate of the Earth—its landscapes, vineyards, and gardens—are in the hands of the community that, by its choices, can either repeat history or transform it.

“I Laid Waste Your Gardens” (Amos 4:6-13)

The poetry of Amos echoes the message of Isaiah 24:1-13, but now the destruction envisioned will be even more devastating to the landscape. Part of a woe (Amos 4:1-13), verses 6-13 paint an uncomfortable and startling picture. In them the poet describes God expounding on all the divinely initiated negative actions that were done against Israel in the past with the hope that Israel would return to God. God withheld rain, struck the people with blight and mildew, laid waste the gardens, had the caterpillar devour fig and olive trees, sent out pestilence, killed the young men with the sword, carried away people’s horses, made a stench go up the people’s noses, and even overthrew some of them.

In these verses the poet uses belief in the Deuteronomic theology of retribution (curses) to upbraid the people for their past transgressions and to warn them once again that estrangement from God leads to devastating consequences. By striking the food sources—the land, the gardens, the crops—God would duly punish the people for their unrepentant attitude. Here the poet portrays God as intentionally manipulating various elements in the natural world, including gardens and vineyards (v. 9), in a destructive way so as to coax the Israelite people to return to God. History has borne out, however, that neither of the poet's tools—the Deuteronomic theology of retribution with its curses or the plight of the landscape—moved the people to reform their ways. Thus the text becomes prophetic on another level: neither punitive measures nor violence succeeds in changing hearts as needed for the reform and transformation of attitudes and life.

“Your Cattle Will Graze in Broad Pastures” (Isaiah 30:28-26)

According to the writings of the prophets, the devastation of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah is not the final “word,” nor is it the last act before the curtain falls. Devastation and painful suffering endured by people and the natural world alike become the impetus for lamentation and the occasion for God to hear, once again, the cry of the poor:

Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more.
[God] will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when [God] hears it, [God] will answer you. (Isa 30:19)

In Isaiah 30:18-26 the poet describes a time when people are restored to their God and the natural world, once devastated, is restored to its rich beauty and lushness, becoming once more a place inhabitable and fit to sustain all of earth's creatures.

In God's great compassion, God will heal the people and the landscape. This healing will take place through the waters that will cascade down from the heavens:

He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall.
(Isa 30:23-25)

These images of fertility and prosperity describe the future happiness of the people. Trauma and exile will give way to restoration and a new day for all creation (cf. Isa 35:1-10).

“They Shall Flourish As a Garden” (Hosea 14:1-7)

Once the people return to their God and the restoration of right relationship between God and the Israelites and between the Israelites and one another takes place, along with the restoration of the landscape, healing can move to a deeper experience. In Hosea 14:1-7 the poet pleads with the people to return to their God—to right relationship—so that the divine work of transformation, which is beyond restoration, can take place not through waters from the heavens but through the actual experience of God, who will be “like dew to Israel.” When Israel encounters its God it will “blossom like the lily,” “strike root like the forests of Lebanon” (14:5), become beautiful “like the olive tree,” smell “like Lebanon” (14:6), “live beneath [God’s] shadow,” “flourish as a garden,” “blossom like the vine,” and have fragrance “like the wine of Lebanon” (14:7). Hence God becomes the sustainer, nurturer, and transformer of life who offers hope to all. Israel is destined to flourish and be transformed, a vision captured through the metaphorical language the natural world provides.

Summary

Israel as a land, a people, and a nation lived to experience what the prophets had warned about—devastation, ash heaps, and ruins from the ravages of war and the violence of injustice. After their exile to Babylon and Egypt, and after they were freed from exile by the Persian King Cyrus, some of the survivors of the trauma were able to experience resettlement in the land, its restoration, and the rebuilding of the temple. Israel’s prophetic writings show us that devastation of crops, gardens, and landscapes is the result of people’s transgressions. The same is true today as the world community struggles with climate change and the unnecessary loss of countless species.

Today the entire planet is a garden. This garden calls out to us to change our ways so that it can continue to sustain all communities of life. Even though creation is suffering and the garden is dying from drought in some places and overwatering in other places, we are not without hope. The prophet Joel continues to proclaim a word of assurance:

Do not fear, O soil;
be glad and rejoice,
for the LORD has done great things!

Do not fear, you animals of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green;
the tree bears its fruit,
the fig tree and vine give their full yield. (Joel 2:21-22)

Would that we become gardeners, tilling and keeping the garden, embracing the task given to us at the time of creation for the full flourishing of the earth and all of earth's communities that wait for Joel's prophetic word and vision to be fulfilled!

Carol J. Dempsey, OP, PhD is professor of Theology (Biblical Studies) at the University of Portland in Oregon. An expert in the area of Old Testament Prophets, she is widely published and has spoken at professional conferences, colleges, and universities nationally and internationally. She is currently working on two commentaries on Isaiah. Carol is a Caldwell Dominican.

