



# The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

P.O. BOX 608, BELCHERTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS 01007 • PHONE 413/323-4531 • FAX 413/323-9594 • NESAWG@smallfarm.org

## *The Human As Small Farmer: The Restoration of Humankind's Vocation and The Affects of Cultural and Spiritual Values on Work, Community, and Regional Food Systems*

Sam Smith  
Caretaker Farm  
Williamstown, Massachusetts

*How did one species gain such overwhelming dominance over so many others, indeed over the very processes that control life? And how could the members of this clever species fail so utterly and for so long to realize the dire consequences of their carelessly exercised dominance?*

- Daniel Hillel, *Out of the Earth*, p.11

Daniel Hillel, a world-renowned soil scientist, responds to these questions (see epigraph above) by noting that the Book of Genesis gives not one but two accounts of creation. Two accounts by authors the Priestly and the Yahwistic writing from radically different cultural and spiritual perspectives. Two accounts which lead to an understanding of why present culture and spirituality have been so inadequate to the needs of Earth in her time of great distress. And two accounts which may help to explain the grim position of agriculture and the small farmer in the Northeastern United States and the world. "Of the many contradictions between the two," writes Hillel, "the most significant is the role assigned to humans in the scheme of life on earth."<sup>1</sup>

In the first chapter of Genesis composed by the ancient Priestly writers God (called by the plural name "Elohim") decided to make humans in our own

image and let them rule over all the creatures and subdue the earth. For a very long time, the makers and shapers of culture, agriculture, commerce, and even theology have favored this image of the human.

In the second chapter of Genesis the Yahwistic writer describes an entirely different story of creation and humankind's destiny: God formed man and woman out of the soil of the earth and blew into their nostrils the breath of life. And God put them in the Garden of Eden to serve and preserve it. Tragically, the Priestly writer's singular viewpoint has overshadowed the Yahwistic image of humankind, even though the latter echoes throughout the scriptures.

Theodore Hiebert, an Old Testament and Hebrew scholar, provides further elucidation of the passages from Genesis: Created out of arable soil, the Yahwist's human is united with the rest of creation and placed in a subservient relationship to it. This subservience is expressed in the image of the soil as the beginning and end of human life and in the depiction of the cultivation of the soil (or farming) as "service" rather than "subduing." In this agricultural task, the animals made of the same soil are helpers and companions. This human is above all a small farmer. Basic to this image of the human is the

ancient farmer's sense of dependence upon the soil, of the necessity of meeting its demands and cooperating with its processes, and of the ultimate lack of control over nature's own orders and powers.<sup>2</sup>

It is one thing and very exciting and unusual for an eminent soil scientist, Daniel Hillel, to draw on our Western religious heritage in order to advance sustainable farming practices. But it is equally significant and unusual for a prominent Old Testament and Hebrew scholar, Theodore Hiebert, to write a major work that helps to rescue the image and reality of the small farmer from oblivion.

Hiebert's refined, academic research into ancient Biblical texts research intended for an audience of scholarly peers--intersects with two premises that are central to the restoration of regional food systems all over the world appropriate to the needs of Earth. The two premises are: "first, that agriculture is the major mode in which humans interact with the environment and the ultimate basis of human survival<sup>3</sup>, and second, that modern industrial agriculture is not working it is unacceptably destructive to the environment and it is unsustainable."<sup>4</sup>

Hiebert's unique accomplishment is to document theologically and biblically the great divide within the bible between the Priestly writers who espouse exploitation and domination and the Yahwistic writers who espouse nurturing and humility as our natural mode of being.

In the closing chapter of his book, *The Yahwist's Landscape*, Hiebert draws a connection between the Yahwist's idea of the human vocation and Wendell Berry's "vision of human life as dependent on small-scale agriculture, a vision, in a real sense, of the human as a small farmer. To this end," notes Hiebert, "Berry has argued that society take as its model for the human nurturer of the environment, in

contrast to its exploiter, "the old-fashioned idea or ideal of the farmer."<sup>5</sup>

"In such a situation," continues Hiebert, "the Yahwist's conception of the human being as a small farmer takes on new value. It cannot be regarded as a quaint or marginal perspective, but it must be accepted as a perspective with which modern society must reacquaint itself if it is to restore and revitalize the agricultural base upon which its survival depends. The Yahwist's agricultural economy is not a program, per se, though it shares many principles with "new" sustainable models of agriculture. It does, however, provide an image of human identity, an image that is sacred and honored by many and that springs from the roots of the Western religious tradition, that can be a resource for reimagining the proper role of the human in the world."<sup>6</sup>

I have ventured into Biblical religion to introduce the hypothesis that a people's cultural and spiritual ethos affects their relationship to the land, all the creatures of the earth, and the world. And the present time of economic and cultural globalization bears all the hallmarks of a cultural and spiritual bias in favor of domination and exploitation.

To support this hypothesis, I have divided the rest of my paper into three parts. In Part I, "An Historical Perspective," I compare the food system of Israel under the Roman Empire and our Northeast system under the contemporary global economy. Part II, "Earth's Distress is a Crisis of Culture," explores the crisis of our time and our current dilemma. In Part III, "Reformation," I lift up the complementary importance and interplay between religion and a sustainable, secure food system, and the healing of the earth. I feel this complementarity very directly in my own life as a husband, father, farmer, and member of a diverse, small town community.

## Part I. An Historical Perspective

There is one great similarity and one great difference between the food system of Israel under the Roman Empire and our Northeast system under the contemporary global economy. The similarity is that both systems experience a radical decline in farm population, increasing food insecurity, and a food system subject to the interests and control of outside forces. The great difference is in the response of the two societies to the process of alienation from the land and the effects of commercialization of food and agriculture enforced by outside powers, namely Rome on the one hand and multinational corporations on the other. The Israelite response was one of resistance and non-cooperation.<sup>7</sup> Our response has been one of ignorance and indifference by society-at-large and resignation by actual farmers. Of course, the two responses emerge from entirely different cultural and spiritual perspectives.<sup>8</sup> For the Israelites, the land, the soil (adama), the myriad creatures of the earth are all holy, all revelatory of the divine. Consequently, to be alienated from the land was a tragedy of ultimate significance for the Israelite. For us, the land and its creatures are revelatory of nothing except their possibilities for exploitation and for transformation according to our anthropocentric vision.

## Part II. "Earth's Distress is a Crisis of Culture"

John Dominic Crossan, one of the world's foremost experts on the 200 year period of Israel's religion and history that sandwiches the life of the historical Jesus, speaks of the ancient Israelite farmer's alienation from the land as "the great and terrible divide in peasant life."<sup>9</sup> And, so too, today, many farmers in the Northeast as well as throughout the rest of the country also find themselves, to borrow Crossan's words, "on the other side of commercialization in a land that belongs to God."<sup>10</sup> But, unlike the Israelite farmers under the Roman

Commercial Agrarian Empire, the farmers of our time have been weaned from the land without as much resistance or protest. I suspect the reason that our alienation from the land has not been as deeply upsetting to us, as it was to the ancient Israelite farmers, is that we rarely felt its sacredness. That the land belongs to God or The Great Spirit was rarely imbedded in our spiritual or cultural life. Therefore, with a hint of a looming spiritual loneliness, we sadly sold the land to others to be exploited and then abandoned as a forgotten piece of 'real estate.'

Larry Rasmussen, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, puts our situation very bluntly:

"Earth's distress is a crisis of culture. More precisely, the crisis is that a now- globalizing culture in nature and wholly of nature runs full grain against it. A virile, comprehensive, and attractive way of life is destructive of nature and human community together this is the crisis. Soils, people, air, and water are being depleted and degraded together."<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult to imagine what we can do. We think there is nothing in our cultural and spiritual traditions to deal with globalization. But the fact is there are deep sources of inspiration in our ancient religious and cultural heritage including the vision of the human-as-farmer. This is not a romantic vision of a return to a purely agrarian society, but a practical vision of the necessity of re-imagining our common human vocation to serve and preserve the earth.

## Part III. Reformation

Rasmussen describes our natural vocation as one encompassing uncompromising fidelity to the earth. One of the most moving ways he explains this fidelity is through a quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and Nazi resister. Bonhoeffer writes, "A glimpse of eternity is revealed only through the depths of earth." The profound old saga

tells of the giant Antaeus, who was stronger than anyone on earth; none could overcome him until once in a fight someone lifted him from the ground; then he lost all the strength which had flowed into him through his bond with the earth. The person who would abandon the earth, who would leave its present distress, loses the power which still holds him by eternal, mysterious forces. The earth remains our mother, just as God remains our Father, and our mother will only lay in the Father's arms those who remain true to her.<sup>12</sup>

The question remains: *How do we restore our bond to the earth? How do we return to the ground when we have for so long prospered apart from it - and often at the expense of the landless who were once very much at home in the earth?*<sup>13</sup>

If we are not to be locked in a 'Catch-22,' we must, in the words of Larry Rasmussen, "revisit creatively the world of religion, ethics, and human symbols in the interest of necessary conversion to earth."<sup>14</sup>

Again Rasmussen:

"Daniel Maguire puts things crisply. 'If current trends continue, we will not. And that is qualitatively and epochally true. If religion does not speak to this, it is an obsolete distraction.'"

Religion speaking to earth and its distress in nondistracting ways is a challenge! And the thesis is that religion not only should help effect our conversion to earth but can help it. At the same time, it cannot do so without reformation. The reformation is that all religions and moral impulses of whatever sort must now be matters of unqualified earthbound loyalty and care. Faith is fidelity to earth and full participation in its ecstasy and agony.<sup>15</sup>

A final personal word. I am a small farmer. Through my vocation, I feel a deep connection with the soil community as well as an affinity with others who are

still living as small farmers. I also feel that we as a group exist on the edge of an abyss in that our vocation and the world of Nature are disappearing together without a trace under a global culture of domination. This is very sad because small farmers are not only interacting most directly with the earth but also living in the places where the earth is hurting the most. If only human beings could all see themselves as small farmers in the sense that their common and ultimate vocation to serve and preserve the Garden is as close and direct as the earth under their feet, then healing could and will begin.

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References:

1) Daniel Hillel, *Out of the Earth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 12.

2) Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 158-9. Hiebert rephrases the contrast between the Priestly and the Yahwist writers in other arresting ways. As a small farmer myself, my attention was especially drawn to these words: "Two opposite views of the relationship between humanity and the earth are present here: for the Priestly the human is the land's master, coercing it into service, while for the Yahwist the human is the land's servant, performing the duties demanded by its powers and processes." (p.157)

3) This first premise is a truism that continues to be overlooked with fateful consequences for both Humankind and Otherkind. The part that is especially ignored is the fact that "agriculture is the major mode in which humans interact with the environment. But nearly all farmers—both large and small—are pressured to push the land for all it can produce without regard for the well-being of the themselves or the land they work. The blunt truth is that society at large—and particularly the people of

wealth and power—are only interested in the fruits of the land. But they have rarely been willing to share with the farmer the costs of caring for the land.

4) Ibid., 148.

5) Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977), 7. (Quoted by Hiebert, 149)

6) Ibid., 149.

7) The Jewish peasant revolts beginning around 200 B.C.E. and ending with the destruction of Jerusalem's Temple in 70 C.E. were not only revolts against the economic oppression caused by the forces of "globalization" but also against the Roman Commercial Agrarian Empire that was forcing peasants off their farms and onto the country roads or city streets.

8) There is also a different economic context or perspective. The American farmer has some economic alternatives when the farm economy fails. But for the ancient Israelite peasant, there is no safety net. Furthermore, to be alienated from the land by commercial forces was for the Israelite not only a desecration of the land but also the cause of one's spiritual death.

9) John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 336.

10) Ibid., 335.

11) Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics* (Marynoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 7.

12) Ibid., 297.

13) An answer that comes to mind is Jubilee—the Jewish ideal of agrarian reform and radical

egalitarianism. But, then, where does the cultural impulse for agrarian reform come in a culture in which the vision of the human as a small farmer is such an alien and unrecognizable vision.

14) Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Ethics Earth Community* (Marynoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 15

15) Ibid., 10.