

Recognize kinship to the land, Old Testament scholar urges

October 27, 2018

WACO—The Bible speaks both of the created world and of humankind as “the works of God’s hands,” and people should recognize their kinship to the land, an Old Testament scholar told a Baylor University symposium on stewardship of creation.



Speaking at a Baylor University symposium on stewardship of creation, Ellen Davis from Duke Divinity School discusses humanity’s kinship to the soil. (Photo / Ken Camp)

“The Bible is the best single resource for reimagining our place in the created order,” said Ellen Davis, professor of Bible and practical theology at Duke Divinity School.

Davis delivered the William Carey Crane Scholars Lecture during the annual Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture.

“There is a direct correlation between the core concerns of Scripture and

our most urgent contemporary need; namely, to reckon with the character of the world as it really is—the work of God’s hands—and reckon also with the degradation our hands have wrought,” she said.

Appeals to the moral imagination

The Bible appeals to the moral imagination and offers true hope, not a hollow fantasy based on wishful thinking, she insisted.

“Scripture is essential for building genuine hope, as distinct from a baseless fantasy that everything will work out OK if we just want it badly enough,” Davis said. “Politicians may traffic in fantasy, but the biblical writers aim at building substantial hope—a hope grounded in realistic possibilities. And building hope of that kind is always and everywhere an act of the moral imagination.”

The biblical writers had a clearer understanding of the physical world and their place in it than most contemporary readers because they lived close to the land said Davis, author of *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*.

The Bible offers “depictions of the unique creature we are in a world we probe and manipulate, celebrate and change, but a world we do not and can never control,” she said.

Read the Bible through agrarian lens

Scripture read through the lens of agrarianism recognizes that “human health and wellbeing—shalom—is indivisible from the shalom of the land and its nonhuman creatures,” she said.



Ellen Davis

“Agrarianism is a perspective we are now prepared to recognize once again as being essential for human survival,” Davis said.

“We are able to recognize it for the simple but sobering reason that around the globe, we have no more arable land that can be put to cultivation without irreversible destruction. ... More than 40 percent of the land globally, the land under cultivation, is degraded—much of it seriously degraded.”

The Genesis depiction of God creating the human—Adam—from the fertile reddish-brown soil makes clear the connection between humanity and the land, she said: “We are humans from humus.”

According to Genesis, “The fertile land is the ancestor. ... The soil comes first,” Davis said.

In Leviticus 26:42, God tells the people of Israel he will remember his covenant to Jacob, Isaac and Abraham and will remember the land, she noted, pointing to the land itself as a “covenantal ancestor.”

“The land is the first ancestor from the perspective of Leviticus,” she said.

“And therefore, the land is worthy of honor, possibly above all other ancestors.”

Turning to the Psalms, Davis pointed to metaphors that illustrate God’s salvation in terms of preserving and protecting. In Psalm 65, for example, God is compared to an attentive farmer who cares for the soil—a word-picture with deep meaning for farmers seeking to grow crops in the steep, fragile and semi-arid soil of Canaan.

The region could be farmed successfully only by experienced farmers who understood the possibilities and limits of each particular piece of land, she stressed. Davis contrasted that individualized approach with modern industrial agriculture practices that ignore the particularities of a given place and seek to maximize short-term yields at the expense of the future.

‘Economy of sufficiency’

Davis noted the Feeding of the 5,000 as the one miracle of Jesus recorded in all four Gospels, focusing particularly on the story told in John 6. That account describes divine generosity in providing all the people needed, but also speaks of collecting what was left over so nothing went to waste.

“You might say that Jesus is establishing an economy of sufficiency—an economy of enough but not too much,” Davis said.

The biblical writers lived in “a hungry world,” she observed, and some people played off of the fear food scarcity engenders, just as they do today.

“The vicious combination of greed and fear generates inevitably a destructive food system such as our own—a system that plays on the fear of food scarcity and ironically guarantees long-term scarcity by exhausting the land,” she said.

“We as a nation and as a culture have lost confidence that we can have

enough food without overproducing and hoarding, without laying waste to our land. In other words, we have lost the vision that communities can produce food within the limits of nature rather than industry producing food by violating those limits.

“This gospel story speaks into our lack of confidence. It speaks of the daily generosity of God working through the created order, as well as through human hands and hearts. God’s generosity is sufficient to satisfy our genuine needs, though not our greed.”