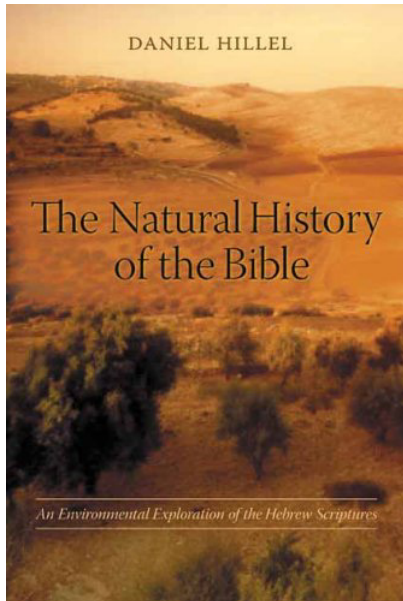


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Hillel, Daniel

The Natural History of the Bible: An Environmental Exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures

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Norman Habel
Flinders University
Adelaide, South Australia

This volume by Daniel Hillel is the work of a bone fide ecologist who has lived for many years in the various domains of Palestine. His task includes enlisting sources of knowledge additional to those brought to bear on the subject of traditional biblical scholarship. He was involved in early stages of mapping the land, vegetation, and water resources of the newly established state of Israel. The Bible, he maintains, is replete with information that is of interest to ecologists and cultural historians and reflects a dynamic interplay between the environment and the culture that evolved.

His premise is that the Bible evolved within a particular combination of environmental circumstances and that the former can only be understood in relation to the latter. Hillel locates himself midway between the hot “infra-red” end of the spectrum of Bible interpreters, represented by the literalist fundamentalists, and the “ultra-violet” end of the spectrum represented by the rationalists who view the Bible stories as entirely mythical fantasies.

He intends to read the Bible “as it was meant to be read,” with an open mind and an active imagination, “projecting ourselves into the time and space of the original stories and pronouncements and experiencing them afresh with an empathetic attitude” (8). He

speaks of “an environmental reading of the Hebrew Scriptures” seeking to reveal the role of ecology in shaping the life and lore of the Israelites. This approach is to be distinguished from the ecological hermeneutic being developed in writings such as *The Earth Bible*, where the goal is to read “from the perspective” of Earth or the Earth community.

Hillel identifies five principal ecological domains existing in close proximity to one another but differing significantly in human habitability and potential resources: the *rainfed* (relatively humid) domain, the *pastoral* (semiarid) domain, the *riverine* domain, the *maritime* (coastal) domain, and the *desert* domain. In addition, he identifies two cultural domains: the *urban* and the *exile* domains. The society in each domain evolved a characteristic culture with its own folklore, deities, beliefs, and rituals.

Israel, contends Hillel, having traversed and sojourned in each of these disparate domains, absorbed various elements and in so doing synthesized a new culture and a new faith. This faith reflected these multiple experiences and articulated a perception of the unity of creation with a single God. The Israelites, claims Hillel, created or projected for themselves a God who could help them survive in these various domains and fulfill their needs for assurance, protection, and inspiration. Out of necessity, he argues, they conjured up a warrior God to protect them from their foes in precarious landscapes. Ultimately they recognized a monotheistic premise that all phenomena in nature are essentially interconnected and operate under a single guiding principle, a principle that scientists today would recognize.

Hillel devotes a chapter to each of the seven domains he has identified in the Bible, recognizing the connection with ancient Near Eastern documents and culture. Thus the riverine domain is interpreted in the light of Mesopotamian influences, such as the *Enuma Elish*, associating the *tehom* of Gen 1:2 with the figure of Tiamat and the *Gilgamesh Epic* with the biblical version of the flood. The pastoral domain is associated with the legacy of the bedouin patriarchs and the second riverine domain with the sojourn and slavery in Egypt. Hillel suggests, for example, that the plagues were probably natural phenomena, even though it is not likely they happened in such close proximity.

The desert domain was experienced by the Israelites during their wanderings in Sinai and the Negev. Regardless of the route taken by the Israelites, this experience of the desert was significant in their sense of a divine presence in time of adversity. The rainfed domain is identified as the hill district of Canaan where Israel settled and developed an agricultural society dependent on precious rainfalls. The maritime domain relates to those locations where Israel interacted with the Philistines and Phoenicians, whereas the urban domain involved a convergence between king and cult in Jerusalem. Finally, the exile domain

relates to Israel's experience of expulsion, survival, revival, and return associated with exile in Babylon.

With the analysis of each of these domains there are valuable insights into the specific aspects of Israel's culture as reflected in the biblical record. All of these experiences in the various domains of the environment and history led to the development of an overarching unity characterized by an ethical monotheism. This development, however, did not take place in a vacuum but reflects constant interaction with the cultures of their neighbors. Monotheism evolved as much by environmental factors as any special revelation to inspired religious leaders.

While I may not agree with how each of the environmental factors played a part in creating the language and import of the biblical accounts analyzed by Hillel, I find the evidence for rereading the development of the biblical cultures in the light of key environmental factors extremely significant. I would like to make special mention of the way in which, in appendix 2, Hillel faces the problem posed by the *imago Dei* reference in Gen 1:26–28 and acknowledges that this version “can indeed be construed as a divine ordination to dominate the Earth and to use every nonliving or living thing on it for their own purposes, without reservation or restraint” (242). By contrast, in Gen 2 humans are charged with the responsibility to nurture and protect God's creation. A third appendix is a valuable collection of passages that reflect the imagery and import of the seven domains analyzed in the book.

This volume is a monumental work, taking into account environmental factors not fully appreciated in the past. This work is worthy of consideration as a text of seminaries and universities.