

**Report to the Center for Environmental Justice and Sustainability
on progress-to-date on the Fellowship project entitled,
“How the Creation-Centered, Anti-imperial Gospel of Jesus
was Betrayed by the Emergence of Imperial Christianity”
by Wes Howard-Brook (submitted February 2014)**

This project involves the research and writing of the second volume in a three-part series, which began with *“Come Out, My People!:” God’s Call Out of Empire In the Bible and Beyond* (Orbis 2010). In that volume, I showed how, throughout the Bible, there is a battle between two, radically opposed understandings of who God (YHWH) is and what it meant to be God’s people within each understanding. I refer to these opposing paradigms as the “religion of empire” and the “religion of creation.” In the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed as siding with the religion of creation and against the religion of empire. However, the history of Western Christianity has largely been a story of the very domination that is at the heart of the “religion” that Jesus rejected. In particular, for the purpose of the CEJS Fellowship, I have been researching the specific question of why the perception of earth and its creatures as “good” in the eyes of the Creator was ignored and covered over by the ideology of the so-called “Church Fathers” in the early centuries of Christianity. To focus the research, I have centered my study on two representative cultural contexts: Alexandria as part of the Christian East, and North Africa as part of the Christian West.

Alexandria

Alexandria was, of course, in Egypt, a place with one of the longest history of imperial religion in the world. However, the Greek city founded by Alexander the Great and built up by his successors in the Ptolemaic empire was presented ideologically as “near/beside” (Greek, *ad*) Egypt rather than part of it. A major reason for this designation was to distance the culture of Alexandria from that of indigenous Egyptians.¹ As was the norm within the Greek philosophical milieu rooted in Plato and Aristotle, the city was seen as “higher” than the country. Aristotle systematically made human labor a criterion of *moral* value: hence, indigenous, earth-based practices such as foraging and nomadism were devalued in relation to “value-added” practices such as agriculture.²

The Alexandrian elite “church fathers” such as Clement (2nd century), Origen (2nd-3rd centuries) and Athanasius (4th century) wholly accepted this philosophical premise in constructing “Christian” theology. Although we must be cautious in arguing from silence, neither Clement nor Athanasius *ever*, to my knowledge, consider the sacredness of non-human species in themselves or address questions of human responsibility to preserve God’s “good” creation.

Another key factor in avoiding or ignoring the “religion of creation” tradition among Alexandrian Christian writers was the method of *allegorical biblical interpretation*. The “church fathers” were virtually unanimous in their presupposition that all Scripture was unified in its outlook and goal, and that goal was Christ. However, as discussed at length in *“Come Out, My People!*, even a superficial reading

¹ Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997; Anthony Hirst and Michael Silk, eds. *Alexandria, Real and Imagined*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

² Brent Shaw, “‘Eaters of Flesh, Drinkers of Milk’: The Ancient Mediterranean Ideology of the Pastoral Nomad,” *Ancient Society* 13/14. Leuven, 1982/1983, 5-31, reprinted in Brent Shaw, *Rulers, Nomads, and Christians in Roman North Africa*. Aldershot, UK: Valerium, 1995b, 19-20.

of the biblical collection reveals sharp contrasts in outlook and proscribed practices. Many early Christian writers saw this, too. Those who wrestled with the implications of the contradictions (such as so-called “Marcionites”) were quickly branded as “heretics” by writers who fought to have their own perspective deemed “orthodox” for future generations. Alexandria was one of the central focal points for the development of the allegorical reading method, which subjected the plain meaning of Hebrew biblical texts that seemed in contradiction to the writers’ own understanding of the message of the New Testament to the meaning claimed through allegorizing.³ Classic examples include the reading of Genesis’ and Song of Songs’ accounts of earthiness and sexuality as allegories for the individual soul’s journey with God. Thus, the allegorical method completely repressed “literal” interpretations of biblical texts that dealt with earthy subjects.

North Africa

The focal point of North Africa in the ancient world was Carthage, a city first founded as an outpost for Phoenician traders.⁴ The ancient city was eventually destroyed and later, rebuilt by the Romans. Social historian Brent Shaw has been at the forefront of archaeological and literary studies which investigate the relationship between supposed “Romanization” of the North African countryside and indigenous patterns of hydrology and agriculture. Shaw’s work shows that “Romanization” was as much a matter of an attempted ideological overlay as an actual transformation of historical practices among Berber and other indigenous tribal groups.⁵

In the time period of my investigation (2nd-5th centuries CE), “Christianity” emerged from within this tension between Roman imperial control and ongoing indigenous efforts to survive and maintain traditional cultural patterns. The “church fathers” from this region included Tertullian (2nd century), Cyprian (3rd century) and Augustine (late 4th-early 5th centuries). As in Alexandria, these writers accepted the premises of both Greek philosophy and Roman imperial social order with little resistance. As a result, they each reinforced the hierarchical ideology that put earth and its nonhuman creatures at the bottom.

As in Alexandria, allegorical method became the tool used by Augustine and others in North Africa to avoid the apparent concern of the Hebrew Bible with earthy, “this worldly” concerns. But Augustine added another factor, in response to the social and political crisis of the Roman Empire in the earth 5th century manifested in the Gothic (“barbarian”) invasion of Rome. Rejecting the Christian triumphalism of the 4th century church historian, Eusebius, who had celebrated the emperor Constantine’s acceptance of “Christianity” as God’s victory over the “pagan” world,⁶ Augustine relativized the importance of both earthly empire in particular and earthly life in general. Augustine, trained in the fashionable neo-Platonism of his era, and still at least partially living out of the Manichean traditions that he claimed to have rejected in favor of “Catholic” Christianity,⁷ famously divided reality into two realms: the “city of man” (sic) and the “city of God.” His monumental work of historical theologizing established for the next thousand years and beyond that the goal of “Christian” life was not the incarnation of the biblical,

³ See Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997.

⁴ See generally, Richard Miles. *Carthage Must Be Destroyed: The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Civilization*. New York: Penguin, 2010.

⁵ Brent Shaw, *Environment and Society in Roman North Africa: Studies in History and Archaeology*. Aldershot, UK: Valerium, 1995. See also David Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

⁶ See Timothy D. Barnes, *From Eusebius to Augustine*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1994 and *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge: Harvard, 2006; Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall. *Eusebius: Life of Constantine*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999a.

⁷ James M. O’Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography*. New York: Harper Collins, 2005.

religion of creation vision of earthly *shalom* (peace), but the “salvation” of the “soul” for its future life “above” in the heavenly city of God. Augustine’s work became the paradigmatic expression of “Christian” views on politics and society. As a result, the earth and its creatures were completely removed from being subjects of “Christian” thought.

Conclusion: the fate of the earth in the wider context of the “religion of empire”

This brief summary of my research separates out one strand from the wider ideological perspective I call the “religion of empire.” However, just as today we cannot consider “the environment” apart from the realms of politics, economics and other aspects of human life, understanding how “Christian” theology relegated the earth and its creatures to the margins of conversation and action cannot be considered apart from a holistic analysis of the implications of the religion of empire in the time period under consideration. Hence, my project is not limited to “environmental” aspects extracted from the body of the writings of the church fathers, but will present instead an integrated understanding, in which the earth and its creatures are seen within the larger frame of imperial “Christianity.” Our hope for a healthy planet must call us to respond both to the micro and macro elements of our world and how we perceive and engage with it. I am grateful that the CEJS has invited work that examines both “the forest” and individual trees.