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## Ecological Consciousness and Moral Responsibility in the Doctrines of Semitic Religions

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## Abstract

Raising human awareness of the environment is one of the most important global debates of our time. Today, in Pakistan in particular and the world in general, rapid industrial development, population growth, and indiscriminate use of energy resources have disrupted the balance of the earth, resulting in complex problems such as climate change, increased pollution, and loss of biodiversity. However, it is noteworthy that the concept of environmental protection is not only a part of scientific thought or modern debates, but its details are also present in the basic teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The basic religious teachings of these Semitic religions have declared man as the caliph and guardian of the earth, binding and holding him responsible for the survival and balance of nature. In Judaism, the Torah teaches that the earth and nature are God's trust. The Torah contains commandments such as the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee, which require the earth to rest rather than be continuously cultivated, limit land ownership, and focus on establishing an ecological balance in society. Similarly, the principle of "*bal tashchiyya*" encourages the protection of the earth from unnecessary destruction and devastation, while planting trees is considered a spiritual act in Jewish teachings. In Christianity, according to the New Testament, the entire universe is God's property and man is its trustee and responsible. According to Christian teachings, environmentalism is not merely an optional or social service, but an integral part of Christian faith, worship, and morality. In addition to the concept of creation, human stewardship, and cosmic reconciliation in Christian teachings, modern church documents (*Laudato Si'*) and interfaith/ecumenical efforts, all these teachings agree that the environmental crisis is in fact also the result of a spiritual and moral crisis whose solution lies in justice for God's creation, moderation in spending, and a genuine focus on the reform of the human system of life. In Islamic teachings, the Holy Quran declares man to be the caliph of the earth and commands him to adhere to the principle of balance (*Mizan*). It strongly condemns spreading corruption on earth and instructs the moderate use of natural resources. In the hadiths, planting trees is considered charity, waste of water is prohibited, and good treatment of animals is considered a requirement of faith. In the biography of the Prophet (PBUH), declaring the surroundings of Medina as a safe area, preventing pollution of water sources, and making cleanliness a part of faith are clear practical examples of environmental protection. This article will cover teachings of Semitic Religions in this regard.

### Keywords:

Semitic religions, environment, human consciousness, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Shamita, Balance, Corruption, Planting, Justice and Fairness

## Environment and Human Consciousness

The world today is facing an environmental crisis. Air pollution, deforestation, water scarcity, global warming and climate change have become threats to human existence. In this context, the question of what role religious teachings can play in protecting the environment is important. Semitic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam, not only provide moral principles but also exhort man to live in harmony with the environment and the universe. The Semitic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all emphasize that man is not merely a creature but a trustee of God's blessings on earth. According to the teachings of these religions, everything in the universe has been created for a purpose and man is instructed to live in harmony with all of them. In Judaism, the concept of creation believes that the earth and its resources are the property of God and man is their guardian. In Christianity, nature is considered a sign of God's love and grace, so protecting nature is a practical requirement of faith. In Islam, the

concept of ecology is further expanded, where the rights of water, land, the environment, and even animals are recognized. The result of all these teachings is that man's consciousness should not be limited to himself alone, but should establish a meaningful relationship with the earth, its resources, and other creatures. Thus, Semitic religions remind man that protecting the environment is not only a social responsibility but also a religious and moral duty. This article will present an overview in the light of the teachings of these religions.

## **Meaning of Environment:**

Environment refers to all the natural and social factors that surround human life, such as air, water, land, plants, animals, and human relationships.<sup>1</sup> Human consciousness is the ability that gives a person the ability to understand responsibility, good and evil, and the effects of his actions. If a person awakens his consciousness, he will consider the protection of the environment as his moral and religious responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

## **Environmental Teachings in Judaism**

### **i) God's Trust: The Religious Place of the Earth and Nature**

In Jewish tradition, the earth and all creatures are God's creation and trust, with humans as stewards, not absolute owners. "The earth is the Lord's"<sup>3</sup>, and natural resources should be used in moderation, with gratitude and responsibility. In Genesis 1 is about the Goodness of Creation, "it was good" is said after each stage, which clearly shows the formal value and sanctity of creation. In Genesis two talks about the stewardship of Man "He put Adam in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it"<sup>4</sup> the Hebrew verbs 'abd (to dwell/serve) and sham'ar (to protect) indicate the dual responsibility of "use + protection." It is mentioned in the Noahide Covenant that "God's covenant after the Flood is not just with humans but with "every living creature"<sup>5</sup>, it is a cosmic moral covenant that guides biodiversity and the rights of creatures.

### **ii) Sabbatical Year and Jubilee: The Right to Rest of the Land and Socio-Environmental Justice**

In Judaism, the concept of Sabbatical and Jubilee teaches justice and balance for both the land and society. Under Sabbatical, the land is allowed to rest and recover naturally every seventh year so that the soil remains fertile, while the produce of that year is made available to all, benefiting the poor, the foreigner, and even animals. Shemitah is the command to rest the land every seventh year and to keep the fields from being tilled: Rest of the land is mentioned in Leviticus: "The seventh year shall be a complete sabbath for the land"<sup>6</sup>. The fields are not sown this year, allowing nature to regenerate itself (soil regeneration). Biological and social benefits: Self-growing produce is considered free from ownership (hefker) the poor, the alien, and wild animals also benefit from it.<sup>7</sup> This is not only environmental but also ecological justice.

Yovel (every 50th year)<sup>8</sup>: Return of lands to original families, release of slaves, and rest of the fields long-term stability, protection from concentrated land ownership, and economic-ecological balance.

In this way, above this principle in Judaism, promotes not only environmental protection but also social equality. The Jubilee, which occurs every fiftieth year, goes further by ensuring the freedom of slaves, the return of land to its original families, and the rest of the fields in order to prevent social inequality, unjust land ownership, and environmental exploitation. Thus, these two laws link ecology and social justice in Judaism.

**iii) Avoid Waste (Bal Tashchit): The general principle of “Do Not Destroy”**

A key principle in Judaism's environmental concepts is "Bal Tashchit" (prevention of waste), which considers the conservation of nature and resources a religious obligation. Originally, this commandment in the Torah began with the instruction not to cut down fruit trees, even during war, but rabbinical and rabbinical jurisprudence transformed it into a general principle that all kinds of unnecessary destruction and waste are prohibited, be it food or water, energy or household goods. This principle is associated in today's context with measures such as recycling, energy conservation, careful use of water and the production of less waste. Thus, in Judaism, Bal Tashchit is not just a religious commandment but a comprehensive ethical framework for an environmentally friendly lifestyle that guides human life towards balance and moderation.

Even in war, do not cut down trees especially fruit trees.<sup>9</sup> Rabbinic law (Talmud and later Maimonides, Halkot Milachim 6:10) made this a general principle: unnecessary destruction, waste, wanton waste whether of food, water/energy, clothing/utensils is halachically undesirable and often forbidden. In today's language: producing less waste, reusing/recycling, saving energy, conserving water are direct applications of “Bal Tashchit.”

**iv) The Ethics of Planting and Gardening**

In the teachings of Judaism, planting and gardening are considered not only an agricultural necessity but also a religious and moral duty. The Torah commanded the Israelites to plant fruit trees when they entered the land, which symbolizes that the foundations of social and religious life are intertwined with nature and its continuity. This instruction is based not only on meeting food needs, but also on the concept of protecting the environment, beautifying the land, and preserving resources for future generations.

The Torah teaches planting trees as soon as you enter the land: “When you enter the land and plant fruit trees...”<sup>10</sup> In Judaism, the term ‘Orlah’ means “the forbidden/unused fruit of the first three years”.<sup>11</sup> It's a rule for giving garden/tree time, care, and healing, which teaches sustainable gardening. The Jewish teaching on the protection of fruit trees is: Do not cut them down, even in war.<sup>12</sup> The strategic and moral sanctity of trees is stated in a rabbinical tradition: “If you have saplings in your hand and it is said that the Savior (the Messiah) has come, plant them first”.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in Judaism, tree planting and gardening are not just agricultural or economic activities, but a practical expression of the protection of God's trust, patience, care, and foresight. The law of 'Orlah', the protection of trees even in wartime, and the rabbinical tradition of prioritizing planting even before the coming of the Savior, all testify to the fact that Judaism incorporates the principles of an environmentally friendly lifestyle and sustainable development into its religious and moral values.

**Environmental Teachings in Christianity**

In today's world, the issue of the environment has become a major challenge for every human being and every society. Increasing pollution, deforestation and the misuse of natural resources have put the earth at risk. In such a situation, the question arises as to what relationship man should adopt with nature and with what responsibility he should take care of the earth. Religions have always reminded man of his relationship not only with his Creator but also with his earth and the environment. Christianity teaches in this regard that the earth is God's trust and man has been sent to take care of it. This concept makes man realize that protecting the environment is not just a scientific or social necessity but also a moral and spiritual responsibility, with which his own life and the future of future generations are connected.

### **i) Inspirational and Biblical Basis in Christianity**

In the New Testament, the phenomena of nature, such as birds, plants, and the produce of the earth, are considered symbols of God's mercy and grace. In this context, the teachings of Christianity convey the message that establishing a relationship with love, gratitude, and responsibility with the natural environment is part of faith. Thus, according to the New Testament, environmental protection is not merely a social or economic imperative, but a religious and spiritual duty, which, according to Christian teachings, serves as a means of bringing man closer to God and creating harmony with his creation.

According to the Psalm The Goodness and Ownership of Creation belongs to men, “the entire earth belongs to God, not man; therefore, man’s role is only that of a steward, not of an absolute owner”.<sup>14</sup>

This Biblical verse makes us realize that man has been given authority over the earth, but not ownership. The real owner is God, and on this basis, man has a responsibility to protect the earth rather than destroy it.

Adam was placed to “cultivate and keep” the garden that is, the dual duty of use and protection.<sup>15</sup> This statement makes it clear that man’s relationship with nature is not one-sided but rather balanced. It is permissible to benefit from the earth, but at the same time it is equally necessary to protect and care for it.

### **ii) The Horizon of Universal Salvation**

According to the Christian teachings, through Christ, “all things” are reconciled to God including heaven and earth which includes the environment in the realm of salvation.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Romans 8 presents the concept of the freedom and well-being of “all creation.”

This suggests that the realm of salvation is not limited to humans but extends to the entire universe. This means that in Christianity, environmental protection is also considered a kind of spiritual responsibility and part of God’s plan.

### **The Earth and the Universe Are Created and Owned by God**

The New Testament teaches that no particle of the universe is man’s personal property, but that everything is God’s creation: “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made”.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, states that “all things in heaven and on earth were held together by Christ.”<sup>18</sup> The practical message of this New Testament teaching is that if the earth is God’s property, then man is not its owner but its steward. The job of a steward is always to protect and care, not to exploit and destroy. In today’s environmental crisis, this teaching of Christianity reminds us that to plunder and waste the earth as our own property is fundamentally unfaithful.

### **iii) Man as Steward and Trustee**

In New Testaments Jesus’ parables repeatedly mention stewardship and responsibility.<sup>19</sup> Although these are mostly based on wealth or spiritual responsibility, they also apply to nature and the environment. This makes sense because the earth’s resources water, air, forests, and animals are given to us not just for use but for protection. Just as a farmer is given the responsibility to tend his fields, so man is given the stewardship of the universe.

### **iv) Simple and Modest Lifestyle**

In his teachings, Jesus repeatedly enjoined contentment, simplicity, and avoidance of unnecessary accumulation “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth”.<sup>20</sup> This instruction is directly related to

environmental awareness. Today we see that overconsumption, accumulation of unnecessary things, and greed have damaged nature. According to the Christianity, Jesus' teaching reminds us that true wealth is not what we accumulate, but what we share with others and the earth in a just manner. According to the teachings of Christianity, man is declared to be the trustee and guardian of God's creation on earth. The New Testament makes it clear that the universe and all its creatures are a manifestation of God's wisdom and love. Therefore, respecting the environment is equivalent to respecting the blessings bestowed by God. The teachings of Jesus Christ contain the idea that man should avoid wastefulness, greed, and the misuse of natural resources. According to Christianity, the earth and its resources are not the personal property of any individual but are a trust of God, which it is the moral and religious responsibility of man to take care of and use properly.

The New Testament does not directly provide environmental laws or regulations, but it does contain principles and spiritual concepts that are directly applicable to today's environmental problems. Recognizing the earth as God's trust, recognizing humanity as stewards, seeing salvation as extending to all of creation, and living a simple and balanced life these indicate that Christianity views the environment not simply as a scientific issue but as a fundamental part of faith and morality. Thus, according to the New Testament, Christian teachings invites to see the earth as it truly is: God's trust, which humans have a responsibility to care for future generations.

## **Environmental Teachings in Islam**

### **i) Earth as Trust and Man as Vicegerent**

According to the Quran, the earth has been given to man as a test and trust:

"He it is Who has made you vicegerents on the earth"<sup>21</sup> "

This teaching makes it clear that man is not the real owner of the earth but a custodian. Therefore, he should play the role of protection and care rather than exploitation.

### **ii) Balance in the Earth (Mizan)**

The Quran emphasizes balance and moderation in the universe:

"And He has raised the heavens and set the balance, lest they transgress the balance"<sup>22</sup>

This message highlights the fundamental principle of ecology, namely the preservation of balance. As if the degradation of the ecological system is a violation of the balance that affects humans and other creatures.

### **iii) Condemnation of corruption on earth**

The Quran strictly prohibits corruption on earth after its reformation:

"And do not make mischief on the earth after it has been reformed."<sup>23</sup>

This command is a reminder that pollution, deforestation, and environmental damage are not just scientific problems, but also moral and religious violations.

### **iv) Virtues of Tree Planting**

The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said:

"If the Day of Judgment comes and one of you has a date palm sapling in his hand, then if he is able to plant it, he should plant it."<sup>24</sup>



This Hadith shows that in Islam, planting trees is not just a worldly benefit but also a spiritual responsibility. Even at the moment of Judgment, this act is given priority, which shows the utmost importance of protecting the environment.

#### v) Moderation in the use of water

The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) saw Hazrat Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas (RA) using too much water in ablution and said:

"This is extravagance." Sa'd (RA) asked: Is there extravagance in ablution too? The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "Yes, even if you are on a flowing river."<sup>25</sup>

This teaching highlights the importance of conserving water in the environment. Islam does not like wasting resources, even in worship.

#### vi) Kindness to Animals

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

"Whoever does not show mercy to Allah's creation, Allah will not show mercy to him."<sup>26</sup> This principle emphasizes treating animals, an important part of the ecosystem, with kindness. Harming animals or destroying their environment is against Islamic ethics.

#### vii) Prohibition of polluting the earth and the atmosphere

The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: "None of you should urinate in running water, nor on the path, nor in a shady place."<sup>27</sup> This teaching is directly against environmental pollution. Polluting clean water, roads, and shady places is a nuisance to others and harmful to the environment, which Islam forbids.

#### viii) Making cleanliness part of faith

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

"الطُّهُورُ شَطْرُ الْإِيمَانِ" <sup>28</sup>

"Cleanliness is half of faith."

This principle shows that in Islam, environmental cleanliness is not just for health or social benefit, but a religious duty. Dirt and pollution are considered contrary to faith.

#### ix) Declaring Medina a "Haram" (protected area)

The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) declared the surroundings of Medina a protected area and prohibited hunting and cutting trees there.

"Abraham made Mecca a Haram, and I declare Medina a Haram, its grass should not be cut, its trees should not be cut, and hunting should not be done there."<sup>29</sup>

This initiative is actually the concept of an early ecological zone (protected area), which still exists in modern times as national parks and reserves.

In the light of the hadiths, Islam teaches planting trees, conserving water, being kind to animals, cleanliness, and not polluting the environment. According to these hadiths, protecting the environment is not only a social necessity but also a religious and moral responsibility.

## Conclusion

Rather than viewing the environmental crisis as a mere scientific or technical problem, the solutions become clearer if we view it in the context of a moral and spiritual responsibility. The Semitic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all emphasize that the earth and its resources are a trust given by God, and that man is not their owner but their caretaker. In Judaism, the commandments of the law teach us to rest the earth, protect trees, and be gentle with animals. Christianity views nature as a symbol of God's love and, by including every creature in the circle of salvation, makes man responsible for saving the earth from corruption and degradation. Islam reinforces this concept and considers the environment a system of balance (scale) in which any excess or carelessness is considered a sin.

Thus, it is clear that the teachings of Semitic religions are not limited to worship or spiritual matters, but they awaken human consciousness to the extent that it establishes a civilized and balanced relationship with the earth, nature and other creatures. In today's era, when environmental pollution, climate change and the excessive use of natural resources have presented humanity with a major challenge, the teachings of these religions remind us that protecting the environment is not only a human need but also a sacred duty. If man derives this awareness from his religious heritage, he can not only secure his own survival but also leave a better and more prosperous earth for future generations.

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- <sup>7</sup> Exodus 23:11
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- <sup>10</sup> Leviticus 19:23
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