
The Green Bible

by: Ronald L. Dart

Chances are pretty good that you have a red-letter Bible somewhere in your home. You know, it is where the words of Jesus are in red letters. The first red letter edition was the idea of one Louis Klipsch, then editor of The Christian Herald magazine in 1899, and was first published in 1900. This style of Bible instantly became popular.

I hadn't thought much about it, but I think it was a red-letter edition that led me to do a series of Born to Win radio programs on the actual words of Jesus and it's a helpful distinction when you are looking through the New Testament between the explanatory words of say Matthew and the words of Jesus as you go through the book.

Green Letter Edition Bible

I was surprised a little while ago to stumble onto a green letter edition of the Bible. No, it is not a Bible with the words of Jesus in green, it is something altogether different.

Not long ago I picked up an issue of 'First Things' and I noticed an article titled 'Blessed are the Green of Heart' by Alan Jacobs. I almost didn't read the article because I've been suffering from green overload. It seems that we are being bombarded with green politics from every direction, but I finally did read the article and it was there that I learned about the 'Green Bible.'

Green Bible

The Green Bible has several distinctive features, it is a green letter edition, verses and passages that speak of God's care for creation are highlighted in green. It has contributions by various authors in the form of essays and so they have a whole bunch of essays about environmental issues, about green issues, in the beginning of this Bible.

It has a Green Bible index and a personal study guide. It is printed on recycled paper using soy-based ink with a cotton linen cover. All very politically correct, I am sure.

Now Mr. Jacobs was somewhat put off by the Green Bible edition but not so much because he was against living green. He said "Now before I try to account for my discomfort with the Green Bible, I wish it to be known that my family owns only one car, a six-year-old, four-cylinder, Subaru. We live in a house with only one bathroom and we recycle fanatically. I walk to and from work most days and fly rarely. My carbon footprint is perhaps 1/10000 the size of Al Gores."

"Moreover, if this does not confirm my bona fides then nothing will. I am even now writing a book called, 'The Gospel of the Trees.' If you're looking for someone greener than me," Mr. Jacobs said, "Your only options are the Incredible Hulk and Kermit the frog." Well that's the end of his quotation.

Green Is A Powerful Force

"This problem is not so much in the content of the essays that precede the Scripture, as in subjecting the whole of Scripture," Mr. Jacobs said, "enfolding it in a single adjective, green." On that I agree. I am not uncomfortable with the red-letter edition of the Bible because after all, Jesus' words are the gospel. The problem with a green letter edition is that it adopts or falls under a political descriptor, for after all, green has become a political idea and a powerful force in today's world, but perhaps if the greens don't mind intruding into the publication of Holy Writ perhaps they won't mind if Holy Writ intrudes into politics.

I looked at the Green Bible web site and they make this promotional statement, "The Green Bible will equip and encourage people to seek God's vision for creation and help them engage in the work of healing and sustaining it. With over 1,000 references to the 'earth' in the Bible, compared to 490 references to 'heaven' and 530 references to 'love', the Bible carries a powerful message for the earth." That amused me, because it's the sort of thing I run into often from amateur theologians who now have a computer Bible and they can pick out this sort of valuable information. Wow, one thousand references to the 'earth' in the Bible.

I find that kind of surprising in a way because, especially in the Old Testament, when you see the word 'earth', it is the Hebrew word 'erets' which means land and this word is translated 'land' 1,717 times in the Old Testament.

1,000 References to Earth

It apparently amused Professor Jacobs as well because he went on to say, "The project web site tells us that with over 1,000 references to the 'earth' in the Bible, compared to 490 references to 'heaven' and 530 references to 'love,' the Bible carries a powerful message for the earth! I am not sure what to make of this 'argumentum ad arithmetical'" he said, "unless the point is that the Earth is approximately 1.88 more times important to God than 'love' and 2.04 times more important than 'heaven,' based on my own research into this topic following the same method he said, I am prepared to say that the earth is 7.04 times more important to God than 'donkeys' which are mentioned 142 times in the Bible."

The Green Bible, by the way, is not a new translation. It is the NRSV which is the New Revised Standard Version which has been out for rather a long time now, over 21 years if my memory serves correctly.

The web site tells us this Bible was produced in conjunction with the Sierra Club, Humane Society and the Eco-Justice program of the National Council of Churches.

What Does the Green Bible Look Like?

By the way, the picture of the Green Bible, on the web site, is a beige Bible, not green, this probably had something to do with the stuff they made the cover out of, but it has an image of a green tree on the cover.

Now if you have one of those handy computer Bibles, you can run a count on the number of times a 'green tree' is mentioned in the Bible. I did it for you, 13 times.

Here is one of the Scriptures that mentions the green tree, Isaiah 57 and verse 4, "Against whom do you sport yourselves? Against whom do you make a wide mouth, and draw out the tongue? Are you not children of transgression, a seed of falsehood, {5} Inflaming yourselves with idols under every green tree, slaying the children in the valleys under the clefts of the rocks?"

Green Tree is Icon for Idolatry

You know what could be amusing about this but really isn't, is that the green tree in the Bible is an icon for idolatry. Someone should've thought about that. A serious reader of the Bible would have. Though a representative of the Sierra Club might overlook it.

2,615 References to Man

But here's the question that came to my mind, if the Bible carries a powerful message to the earth, is the earth listening? I can trump the 1,000 references to the earth with 2,615 times the word 'man' is used. Just that word alone, singularly 'man.' By the standards of the Green Bible publishers that makes 'man' 2.6 times more important than the earth. Now that may sound insignificant or trivial to you but it's not, it's a point to be kept firmly in mind.

God Does Care for His Creation

It is not my intent here to put down the idea that God cares about his creation and his charge for man with taking care of it, for example in Revelation 11 and verse 16, we are at God's throne and it says, "The four and twenty elders, who sat before God fall on their faces and worship God, {17} saying, "We give you thanks, O Lord God Almighty, who are and were and are to come, because you have taken to you your great power and have reigned. {18} And the nations were angry, and your wrath has come, And the time of the dead, that they should be judged, And that you should give reward to your servants the prophets and to the saints, And to them that fear your name, small and great, And should destroy them that destroy the earth."

So, it does seem that the time is going to come when God is going to reap a certain amount of vengeance on people who destroy the earth.

Let us not ditch those who argue that we should keep our part of the earth clean and unpolluted, but there's something very important buried in Scripture that is all too often overlooked.

A Bird's Nest

Take this item from the Law of Moses, it is in Deuteronomy 22 and verse 6, "If a bird's nest chance to be before you in the way, in a tree or on the ground," sounds like green stuff, "whether they be young ones, or eggs, and the mother sitting upon the young upon the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young, {7} You shall let the mother go and take the young to you, that it may be well with you and you may prolong your days."

Now this is care for the environment. We used to call this conservation. Now I can hear the applause from the environmentalists in my audience and I appreciate it. I expect that Scripture is in green in the Green Bible. But let me point out something that is often overlooked. It is the last clause of this important principle. Here's what it says, "That it may be well with you and that you may prolong your days." Do you see it?

The benefit, the point of the law, is not intended for the land or the bird, it is for man. It calls upon man to be a little bit more farsighted and realize that if his life is going to be good, he has to take some consideration for his environment. He needs to concern himself with conservation.

The Earth Was Created for Man

Man was not created for the earth; the earth was created to provide an environment for man. Adam and Eve were placed in the garden of Eden and told to dress it and to keep it. For whose benefit? Their own! Not many people seem to understand this fundamental principle of Biblical Law.

Are You ready for this? The Law was made for man and not man for the Law! I don't know why it is, but religious communities have a terrible time keeping this straight. Let us avoid polluting our world but let us remember that it is man that is the important thing. What do I mean by that?

DDT

The World Health Organization wanted to ban the use of DDT worldwide. It was bad for the environment. It is not green to use it. Now I have no doubt whatever, that DDT is bad for the environment, but here's the question, which is more important, the environment or man?

Years ago, we used DDT to control malaria in this country, in fact we all but wiped it out here and also in Europe, but along the way someone learned that DDT was a threat to the birds. Some species were laying eggs with shells so thin that the species was in danger of extinction. Someone in their wisdom concluded, after we had defeated malaria here, that DDT should be banned from use worldwide, so the World Health Organization in the interest of the environment decreed it must be so, never mind that millions, mostly children, are still dying of malaria in tropical climates, primarily in southern Africa.

So, which is more important? Keeping Africa green or saving the lives of, not thousands, but millions of children.

A Green Scripture for the Church in Rome

The apostle Paul found a green Scripture to cite in his letter to the Romans. I feel reasonably sure this will be in green letters in the Green Bible. First Corinthians chapter 9 and verse 9, "It is written in the Law of Moses, you shall not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treads out the corn. Does God take care of the oxen? {10} Or does he say it all together for our sakes? No doubt, for our sakes, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes should thresh in hope. He should be partaker of his hope."

Well how about that? The Law of Moses was written for our sakes that we should learn that a man should be compensated promptly for his labor. Paul seems to say, and it is hard to get around it, God doesn't really give a hang about the ox, it is for man that this was written so we can learn from the lesson. This is something, I don't know why, but people seem to miss it entirely about the Law. The Law is not there just because of the letter, it is there to teach lessons in axiomatic form, by illustrations, like oxen and birds' nest and so forth are illustrations of an underlying principle.

Object of The Law

What is the object of the Law? The salvation of man, the improvement of man, the allowing of man to live long upon the land. This really underlines one of the biggest mistakes men make about the Law of Moses, the Law was handed down to make our lives better, not as some people assume, to turn us into the sinners deliberately.

Jesus encountered this narrowminded attitude one day, it is found in Mark chapter 2 verse 23, He said, "It came to pass as He went through the corn fields on the Sabbath Day, His disciples went and began to pluck the ears of corn. {24} And the Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why do they do on the Sabbath day that which is not lawful?" And He said to them, "Haven't you ever heard what David did when he had need and was hungry and he and the men that were with him? {26} How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest and did eat the showbread, which is not lawful to eat, but for the priests, and gave also to the men that were with him?" Don't you know this?

Now I know that this gives heartburn to some people who are legalists, but the fact of the matter is, it's an exception to the law which Jesus seems to allow!

The Sabbath Was Made for Man

And then Jesus said this (Mark 2:27), "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." Now I am sure that this comes as a shock to some people, but the first Christians continued to keep the Sabbath day throughout the time the New Testament was being written. They didn't turn the day into an idol. It was a law for the benefit of man.

The Pharisees had managed to turn something given to set man free from his work into a burden for the people. Now imagine this, here is a people who were born in slavery, their dad was born in slavery, their grandfather was born in slavery and they worked seven days a week from daylight, when they could see, till dark, when they couldn't. God frees them, marches them off

into the wilderness and among His commandments is one that tells them to take a day off from work every week. And someone thinks this is a yoke of bondage.

The big problem, we run into in religious communities, is a kind of loss of freedom. The problem when Jesus was here in the flesh was not the Sabbath, the problem was the rules that people made about the Sabbath.

The Green Bible goes on to tell us, "All the elements of creation are interdependent in such a way that our actions can have repercussions for creatures we will never see and thus we must evaluate our personal consumption and become free of the idea that our worth and fulfillment are wrapped up in our possessions."

Now there they have me. Jesus said this, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness, for a man's life consists not in the abundance of the things which he possesses" (Luke 12:15). My fulfillment is not wrapped up in possessions, but you see that's in red letters, not green letters. When you put them in green letters you can reverse the whole idea. Our environmental decisions can have repercussions not for mere creatures but for children we will never see.

I wonder, if the poor mothers in Africa, shown in pictures holding their precious children, understand that their babies are being put at risk by green decisions made in a far country by people who don't even have to worry about malaria. Our actions can indeed have repercussions for creatures we will never see. Our green actions can have repercussions for children in faraway places.

The Earth is a complicated system and we can easily come afoul of the law of unintended consequences.

Impact of the Green Bible

One of the things that bothered Alan Jacobs was the impact of having this Green Bible on the reader. He said, "Still the greenness along with the Green Bible Trail Guide at the back of the book does say pretty clearly, this is the stuff that really matters, which is another way of saying, that other non-emphasized stuff doesn't matter as much." Yeah, I can see his point. The red-letter Bible on the other hand merely distinguishes what Jesus said from what the witnesses of his work had to say about it. That is a totally different impact and one wonders a little bit here, if we aren't beginning to take people down a road that God never intended them to walk.

Jacobs went on to ask, "Is it fair to ask the Green Bible to make all these theological connections?" Yeah, because it's complete Bible. The green lettering, the prefatory essays, the concluding study guide collectively suggest that this one theme is the interpretive key to all of Scripture and that is simply not a sustainable claim. In other words, you can't just consider that the key to understanding the Bible is the green letters. Well, someone will say, "But yeah, don't you do that with the red-letter Bible?" Yeah, I suppose you could say that, but what you are saying by that is, that the words of Jesus give us the theme that is the interpretive key to all of Scripture. And that my friend is entirely different.

He also goes on to ask something which I was thinking about as I was going along and hadn't quite put into words. Jacobs asks, "What are we to do with, for instance, these words from Ezekiel 20 and verse 46, "Mortal, set your face toward the south, preach against the South and prophesy against the forest land in the Negev, {47} And say to the forest of the Negev, Hear the Lord, Thus saith the Lord God, I will kindle a fire in you, and it will devour every green tree in you and every dry tree, the blazing fire shall not be quenched, and all faces from north to south shall be scorched by it." Now you know that's a pretty tough thing you're reading here.

Where did the green go? He didn't comment whether that was in green in Ezekiel or not, because here is God burning off huge forest lands. Why is He going to do that?

What Is Important to God?

You know it is odd that we have such a hard time understanding the hierarchy of the importance of things to God in the Bible. The solar system, the planet, the moon, were all made for man. And in fact, when you begin to look at the scope of the universe and you see how huge it is, then you realize it was all made for man.

It is as the Psalmist said in Psalms 8 and verse 4, "When I look up and I consider the heavens which your fingers have made, I say, what is man that you are mindful of him? Or the Son of Man that you visit him?" But you see, God did visit man and He was understanding in His own way. But not only the solar system, and the planet we live on, the moon that goes around and round and round and keeps the tides moving and keep the oceans from going stagnant. All this design was made to create an environment fit for man.

The Day of the Lord

"And they all must pass away and be destroyed, but man, man is supposed to become like God and last forever."

Peter wrote of this in his second letter, chapter 3 and verse 10, "The day the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up." I wonder if that is green in the Green Bible? Peter continues, {11} "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in all holy conversation and godliness. {12} Looking for a hurrying along the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?"

What's odd about this, in a way, is that science tells us the same thing, that the earth, the elements, everything will melt with fervent heat. Our sun will die, the earth will die with it and there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

The green theologians suggest that the new earth is somehow a recycling of the old earth. I don't think so, I don't think reducing the planet to its elements is recycling. Did you notice that the heavens also pass away with a bang! We began all of this with a big bang and it's going to end

with a big bang. The time will happen, but it is so far in the future that you and I don't have to worry about it. But in the course of time, there will be a generation that will.

The story of Genesis begins with the creation, but you would be wrong if you thought that God says, "I made this beautiful planet, Oh I know what I will do, I will add a man to the mix." NO! Man is not an afterthought. The whole creation was created for man and not the other way around.

I think I'll pass on the Green Bible and stick to the red-letter edition. I think it keeps me better focused on what God is up to with project earth.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you know about the Green Bible?
2. What is your opinion about the Green Bible?
3. Do you think politics have any place in the Bible?
4. Do you find it interesting that this Bible version was *produced in conjunction with the Sierra Club, Humane Society and the Eco-Justice program of the National Council of Churches?*
5. What do you think about the point Mr. Dart makes that the green tree is a symbol for idolatry in the Bible?
6. Do you find it ironic that the Green Bible has this symbol on the front cover?
7. God does care about His creation, but we have to make sure we do not idolize anything over God Himself. What scriptures do you know that reveal how mankind is supposed to treat creation?
8. Has society made the environment more important than humans? Share examples.
9. What makes man distinct from the rest of creation?
10. Why do you think God created man?