



Earth in the Balance

An exploration of why Seventh-day Adventists hear in U.S. Vice-president Albert Gore's book *Earth in the Balance* echoes of Old Testament prophets and the book of Revelation.

by Roy Benton

GEORGE BUSH CALLED HIM "OZONE." During their vice presidential debate, Dan Quayle misquoted¹ his *Earth in the Balance*. Conservative columnist George Will said Albert Gore's 1992 book was "wastebasket-worthy," "a jumble of dubious 1990s science and worse 1960s philosophy . . . a powerful reason not to elect its author to high office."² These and other critics scorned Gore's key theme—that the environment should become "the central organizing principle" of the post-cold war world, complete with an ambitious "Marshall Plan" to restore ecological balance.

By the success-is-the-best-revenge standard, Gore has won big. Bush and Quayle are gone, and Gore is vice-president. Most reviews of *Earth in the Balance* range from high praise ("a work of intelligence and passionate authenticity," says *Time*) to ecstatic ("a brilliantly

written, prophetic, even holy book, clearly pointing the way we need to change to assure the survival of our grandchildren," gushes M. Scott Peck.³)

The Harvard-educated Gore was a formidably informed and effective U.S. legislator on environmental issues for 15 years. Gore admits that he wanted to reach the voters not persuaded by his ecological warnings during a failed 1988 bid for the U.S. presidency. But it was the soul-searching following the near-death of his young son from a car accident that gave him the vision to write a book obviously driven by spiritual passion.

Gore persuasively argues that ours is a "dysfunctional civilization." Our abuse of nature has resulted in denial, addiction, and co-dependency—the same symptoms common to drug abusers. We "civilized" societies take for granted life-styles that arrogantly consume a dangerous share of natural resources. We even self-righteously criticize developing countries for the same abuses we have already committed in our own territory. We do not figure industrial waste into the Gross National

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Product of “goods and services.”

In voices ranging from political strategist to scientific enthusiast, from philosophical historian to biblical interpreter, Gore speaks with breathtaking range for a politician. In impressive detail, he rounds up the usual ecological suspects: CO₂ buildup, ozone depletion, destruction of tropical rain forests, loss of biodiversity, excessive pesticides, incineration of municipal wastes, soil erosion, greenhouse effect, etc., etc.

Because these problems are entwined and global, Gore urges nothing short of a vast spiritual awakening, and a “Marshall Plan” in which rich nations help fund the environmental costs of developing nations.

Even the shortcomings of the book point to its authenticity. If Gore dilutes his prophetic passion by bogging down occasionally in 10-point plans, over-detailed explanations of committee testimony, odd metaphors and digressions, or minor slips of fact or arithmetic,⁴ at least we know that the book is no cynical broadside ghostwritten for a politician with a sound-bite attention span.

To this voter, at least, Gore is impressively convincing. Even if one disagrees with Gore’s clean-up remedies—Republicans, for example, may prefer business incentives to Gore’s EPA-monitored “Superfund”—he makes a strong scientific case that only drastic action can avert doomsday. In any case, I wish to explore here Gore’s call for religious renewal, which opens and closes the book and also dominates a 28-page chapter entitled “Environmentalism of the Spirit.”

Gore, a devout Baptist, admits that a “cartoon version” of Genesis has been misused to license careless abuses. He cites other biblical texts to show that “dominion” should not entail “domination” nor “an arrogant and reckless attitude toward nature.”

God commanded Noah to take into his ark at least two of every living species. Gore’s

modern translation: “thou shalt preserve biodiversity.” Gore’s favorite story, repeated in interviews with *Christian Century*⁵ and *Christianity Today*,⁶ is Jesus’ parable of the unfaithful servant. The servant was charged by the master to be vigilant against vandals. Likewise, we have a divine command to protect our planet.

Gore wishes that politically involved Christians would pay more attention to the environmental crisis. Liberals stress the social gospel, but do not see, for example, that most toxic waste dumps are located in poor neighborhoods. Conservatives are wary of siding with liberals who they think are soft on “godless communism” and big government. Gore says conservatives should learn that “many deeply committed environmentalists have become, if anything, even more hostile to overreaching statism than they are,” having witnessed communist regimes committing the worst ecological sins.

Adventists do not fit neatly into Gore’s liberal-conservative typology. Still, I think that several Gore themes can help us to connect environmental concerns with distinct SDA tenets. For example:

The Sabbath. Given our apocalyptic pessimism, we are tempted to give up on nature as part of a lost world. But in both theory and practice, when we rest on the Sabbath, we remember that God created nature and declared it very good.

Love of Nature. Adventists have always revered nature as a spiritual oasis in a sick world. In the 19th century, perhaps Adventists could simply escape the cities and find renewal amidst “God’s other book.” But Gore proves that we cannot now count on finding nature unspoiled anywhere unless we work for it.

Simplicity. Currently, each person in an industrial country uses many times more resources than those in poor countries. Though Gore doesn’t stress it enough, we who live in rich nations need to develop a “small is

beautiful" life-style that uses fewer resources. We need to use fewer manufactured goods and travel less, and be willing to pay more for "clean" forms of each. Adventists should advocate simplicity as an ecological virtue, enlarging the vision that makes us known for simplicity in dress, entertainment, and eating.

Holism. In his concluding remarks, Gore says: "I have come to believe in the value of a kind of inner ecology that relies on the same principles of balance and holism that characterize a healthy environment . . ." ⁷ Earlier, he spends many pages blaming religion for perpetuating Greek preferences for mind over body, spirit over nature, science over moral responsibility.

Gore himself goes far to the other extreme: "It is my own belief that the image of God can be seen in every corner of creation, even in us, but only faintly. By gathering in the mind's eye all of creation, one can perceive the image of the Creator vividly." ⁸

Perhaps Gore wobbles as he walks the thin line between holism and pantheism, but Adventists should empathize. (Can you hear us, John Harvey Kellogg?) Even so, Gore's analysis serves as a corrective to those—including too many Adventists—who do not see the global environment as the home of God's activity. We should be ahead of fellow evangelicals who are struggling with the same issues (see Anthony Campolo's *How to Rescue*

the Earth Without Worshiping Nature). ⁹ Adventists should draw again from its heritage of holism and its corollaries, insisting that a healthy environment and a healthy body are crucial not only to spirituality but to a proper ecological order.

Apocalyptic. Of course, Adventist apocalyptic has been historically more attuned to spiritual conversion than preserving nature. But Gore thinks the former is needed to bring about the latter, so maybe we are already halfway there.

In many respects, the closest modern counterparts of the apocalyptic prophets are radical environmentalists: consider their shrill rhetoric warning of impending doom on a global scale, their faith in the power of a committed and knowledgeable few to blast an impatient trumpet for radical repentance. Indeed, Gore's language, like the final passages in Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth*, ¹⁰ often eerily echo the minor prophets and the book of Revelation.

Whether environmentalists like Gore get all their facts straight may be beside the point. In fact, if a prophet's role is part proclamation and part prediction, the most "successful" prophet is one whose proclamation is so potent that the prediction fails. If environmentalists like Gore prove to be Jonahs—so effective that their predictions are not realized—our grandchildren can rejoice that they did not proclaim in vain.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Quayle repeatedly charged that "on page 304," Gore advocated spending \$100 billion for his environmental "Marshall Plan." Gore did note that the original Marshall Plan to save Europe involved 2 percent of the GNP. In today's dollars that is about \$100 billion, but Gore nowhere says that we should necessarily spend the same amount now.

2. "Al Gore's Green Guilt," by George F. Will, *Washington Post* (September 3, 1992).

3. "A Crisis as Real as Rain" (book review), by Lance Morris, *Time* (May 4, 1992).

4. For a catalog of errors, real and imagined, see "Captain Planet for Veep," by Ronald Bailey, *National*

Review (September 14, 1992), pp. 40-46.

5. "Earth in the Balance: An Interview With Al Gore," *The Christian Century* (April 8, 1992), pp. 368-374.

6. "Preserving God's 'Very Good' Earth" (interview), *Christianity Today* (September 14, 1992).

7. Page 367.

8. Page 265.

9. Anthony Campolo, *How to Rescue the Earth Without Worshiping Nature* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, Pubs., 1992).

10. Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).