

# Chapter 7

## Andean Llamas and Earth Stewardship

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**Abstract** Stewardship of the land often is used as a metaphor for environment ethics. However the term is problematic because of its origin in hierarchical social structure implying a master-servant relationship. Read from historical conditions of empire and technological prowess stewardship can lend itself to environmental exploitation. In contrast, read from the ancient Adam and Eve Hebrew myth and Sabbath tradition and non-Western peasant cultures such as the Aymara of Bolivia, stewardship signifies restraint, mutuality, and advocacy for the Earth.

**Keywords** Adam and Eve • Advocacy for justice • Bio-historical • Mutuality • Peasant societies • Sabbath

Many llamas roam the high plains of Bolivia and they leave a lot of dung around Andean villages, usually in specific places of their own choosing (Fig. 7.1). Llamas are culturally and economically important because they provide useful products for Andean peasants, including dung, which is a principal source of fertilizer.<sup>1</sup> They also figure prominently in the Andean symbolic universe. Llama representations are common in various artistic manifestations; llama fetuses often are buried under the threshold of newly constructed homes; llamas are sacrificed to assure people's well-being; and llama body parts are used in healing rituals.

Several years ago I visited an Aymara community south of La Paz, to consult with villagers about economic development projects. It was a beautiful day, the kind of day that made me understand why the Incas worshipped the sun, so we decided to hold our meeting outdoors. We spread out on the ground, continued our meeting, drinking coca tea and then having lunch. After a while it was evident that I was the only one who gave any importance to where we had chosen to sit: we were sprawled out in piles of dry llama dung.

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<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of llamas and alpacas in rural Andean life, see Palacios-Ríos 1988; for information on agricultural production on the High Andean plains, see Mamani 1988.

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**Fig. 7.1** A llama caravan transporting products to market near Lake Titicaca, Bolivia. Llamas have been used as beasts of burden in the Andes Mountains for hundreds of years, making possible extensive regional trade relations (Photo by Roy H. May Jr.)

My Aymara companions obviously had no problem at all sprawling out in llama dung, but their doing so was subversive of my Western cleanliness ethic. However for them, far from signifying something dirty, llama dung was part of the cycle of life, a feature of nature worthy of respect and care. Llama dung not only expressed life, it also symbolized future life through enriched soil for cultivation. Indeed, it seemed to me that they saw a connection between themselves and the dung. They knew themselves to be composed of the same organic material. Like the llamas that produced important dung, they too were creatures of the earth. My Andean companions were true stewards of the environment: they respected and cared for llama dung. Not only that, they had demonstrated many times during the half-millennium since the Spanish conquest that they were ever ready to defend vigorously llama dung and their own cultural integrity (see Cárdenas 1988; Stern 1987). Surely caring and respectful mutuality for the Earth and its defense, are the basis of environmental or Earth stewardship.

In recent years, “stewardship” has become a common way of talking about how people ought to relate to the earth. Although it echoes positively among many different social groups, the idea is especially important for Judaism and Christianity, religions that have had such an influence on the Western world. Indeed, using stewardship as a model for how humans ought to relate to nature is a Judeo-Christian contribution. However most of the discussion of stewardship has taken place in the world’s affluent nations. Any idea “must be investigated in relation to the praxis out of which it comes,” as José Míguez-Bonino (1975, p. 91) affirms. So, how might the idea be understood from the perspective of non-affluent, non-Western people and how could that perspective enrich an understanding of Earth stewardship? This chapter responds

to these questions by discussing environmental or Earth stewardship using “peasant economy” as a hermeneutic and, therefore, proposes that, like the Aymara Indian-- and Adam and Eve--, stewardship is best understood as caring and respectful mutuality for the earth and its defense.

## 7.1 Stewardship in Western Thought

By definition stewardship means taking care of and managing someone else’s property. Its origin is in ancient English social structure (as well as that of the Ancient Near East, Rome, Greece and across feudal Europe) in which the household duties were performed by domestic servants who were guardians and managers of the property of the owners. Clare Palmer (1992, p. 77) explains, “The idea of stewardship originates in a society which is based on slavery or serfdom, and represents a despotic and autocratic form of government, a fact which is particularly clear when considering it in the feudal context.” However the term became disassociated from its original context and became associated generally with managing other people’s goods and as restraint on one’s own use of those goods or property. As John Passmore (1974) indicates, Western traditions of stewardship and cooperation with nature are diverse, complex, and have changed over time. It was not until the late seventeenth century that the idea was applied to nature. Richard Bauckham (2011, p. 58) argues that it was first used as “a response to the growing sense of human control over nature” brought about by the Italian Renaissance and “the excessively anthropocentric Baconian view” of human domination, this in the framework of the cultural Christianity of the time. Human control of nature continued to be assumed, yet not in an unlimited fashion because, it was argued, “the world was not created solely for human benefit but for God’s glory” (Bauckham 2011, p. 59). Although stewardship in this sense introduces the idea of restraint, it also argued for human control over chaotic nature (Bauckham 2011, p. 60). Humans were understood as separate from and above nature. For Michael Northcott (1996, p. 129), “the fundamental problem ... is the implication that humans are effectively in control of nature” and sets up a master-servant relationship. Still, as Northcott (1996, p. 180) explains, “the concept of stewardship of nature is mobilised (sic) in the Western tradition from the Fathers to Benedict to refer to the just and gentle care of nature by humans.” The problem is its later association with property rights thus turning stewardship into “a metaphor of human control and mastery over nature.” In addition, Palmer (1992, pp. 72–73) argues that the idea became inseparably connected to money, as managing nature as a bank account for human enrichment.

Although stewardship in relation to nature is not a theological nor Biblical concept, but rather an idea used for theological construction and applied to certain Biblical texts, these interpretations were based mainly on readings of the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, especially Genesis 1 where human beings are given “dominion” over God’s creation, that reflected the interpreter’s own time. In historical context, the “praxis” of the time was that of emerging science, technology, and

empire (seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and the consolidation of modernity). These interpreters clearly saw themselves as having dominion over nature. The texts seemed to fit them well, even though some saw the need to place limits. Thus, as Palmer (1992, p. 82) explains, “These assumptions, which lie behind most uses of stewardship, demonstrate that stewardship is an anthropocentric ethic, which considers it to be better not only for human, but for the rest of the natural world, for nature to be managed and made fruitful by human standards.” Stewardship, then, in the context of technological prowess (and expanding empire), understands the Earth in terms of its utility for (colonizing) people; it refers to the administration of nature to assure the needs of empire. Palmer (1992) thinks stewardship can never be disassociated from this meaning. David Ehrenfeld and Philip Bentley (2001, p. 132) rightly indicate the problem for today:

When stewardship is corrupted by power in the absence of restraint, it becomes ecological tyranny and exploitation. This is the central problem of stewardship, a problem that has always existed but has become critical only with the rise of modern technology and its side effects, including overpopulation. With technology, humanity has achieved a power and a presence that is utterly subversive of the practice of stewardship. Modern theorists have despaired of finding noncoercive ways of resolving this tragic dilemma, and many environmentalists have condemned stewardship itself as an inherently unworkable concept.

Still, stewardship can have different meanings in different socioeconomic and political contexts; the material conditions in which stewardship is conceived inevitably shapes the concept itself. Thus different historical praxis—material conditions—can imbue stewardship with alternative meanings and can provide novel insights for interpreting the Biblical texts that often are argued as the conceptual origin of the idea of stewardship. The ancestral relationship between Aymara people and llamas, including llama dung as a metaphor for peasant societies, offers such an alternative interpretative framework.

## 7.2 Adam and Eve as Andean Peasants

The Ancient Near East (approximately fourth millennium BCE to the fourth century BCE) was a society of peasants and pastoralists (Wright 1990). Studies of peasant societies demonstrate several distinguishing characteristics (Chayanov 1966; Shanin 1971):

1. Production is motivated by, and oriented toward, the family unit, concerned with providing basic needs.
2. Market ties are weak; the major concern is not accumulation of capital, but rather equitable distribution within the family and village.
3. Labor is contributed by the family and the village through collective and reciprocal arrangements.
4. Land is the basis of livelihood, however land is not understood as private property in the capitalist sense, but as family or community property.

5. Existential identification is with the family, the land, and the village in such a way that the individual, family, and village form an indivisible whole.
6. The basic structure/control over land resources is vested collectively in the village.

Clearly the earth or land is fundamentally important to peasant societies. This is manifested in the rich symbolic representations and religious rituals and beliefs about the land that are common to peasant societies. These traditions emphasize the earth as the substance of human genesis and as the means that make life possible. Humanity is seen as being part of a networking of interrelationships binding together the earth and the human, in such a way that a good and just life is facilitated. Access to land is understood as a right that cannot be denied because the Earth, as the foundation of life, belongs to all living creatures (see Eliade and Sullivan 1987). Among the Quechua and Aymara of the Andes, the earth is *pachamama*, their mythical-religious concept of space. *Pacha* signifies the space of maximum security in the present, and is identified with the *ayllu* or traditional village with its homes, cultivated fields and common pasture lands. *Mama*, as feminine, maternalizes the *pacha* and is manifested in the earth. Thus the *pachamana* is fertile earth apt for cultivation, that nourishes and cares for humans and other creatures (Aguiló 1988).

The ancient Hebrews also were concerned for fertile earth. For them, land was a divine gift, an inheritance from Yahweh, to be respected and managed according to Sabbath. (See Brueggemann 2002; for an important study of land in the Hebrew Bible see Habel 1995). As “creator”, God or Yahweh, is the “owner” of the land who establishes, through Sabbath, how the earth is to be lived. Yahweh, then, grants the Earth in usufruct to humanity as an inheritance. For the ancient Hebrews, the land was not property but rather the good that made life, as well as personal and cultural identity, possible.

“Inheritance” incorporates the idea that the earth itself is the substance of human genesis and that there is a symbiotic relationship between humans and the earth that is activated in mutual interaction. It also lifts up the social dimension of the earth and, therefore, was the basis of ancient Hebrew agrarian law that restricted how the land was to be used: land could not be bought or sold; part of the produce had to be left for the poor; the land had to rest, that is, be left fallow for certain periods of time, among other legal provisions governing the use of land. These were provisions required by Sabbath, the seventh day of creation according to Genesis 2: 2–3. Sabbath restricts the use of the Earth and subverts human efforts to control according to their own desires. To this restrictive end, the ancient Hebrew Scriptures contain numerous Sabbatical laws and regulations.

The proper Biblical text for basing the Judeo-Christian idea of stewardship as a conceptual ethical model for the earth-human relationship is the story of Adam and Eve (Gn 2: 4–25), the oldest of the Biblical creation stories.<sup>2</sup> This is because the text so clearly reflects peasant mentality and experience.

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<sup>2</sup>Frequently Gn 1:1–2:4, the creation myth of 7 days, where “dominion” over the earth is granted to humanity, is cited as the model for Judeo-Christian stewardship. However this text is not properly about stewardship but rather about “public administration,” although it introduces the key idea

Adam and Eve are Ancient Near Eastern peasants whose purpose in life is to cultivate and care for the land. The scene is a “garden”—such as the *chakra* of the Andes of South America or the *milpa* of Mesoamerica—where food is produced for the family by its own labor. Adam is placed there “to till it and to keep it” (Gn 2:15). The Hebrew word translated as “to till” or “to cultivate” literally is “to serve” while “to keep” in Hebrew means “to protect” or “to guard.” So Adam is to cultivate and care for soil, to be its servant and to protect it. Indeed Yahweh made Adam because “there was no one to till the ground” (Gn 2:5). Adam himself is part of the soil. In an earlier verse we are told that Adam is made “from the dust of the ground” (Gn 2:7). In the original Hebrew “dust of the ground” is *’adama*, humus or cultivable soil, top soil, the very substance of life. Adam, then, is a creature of the earth, named “soil.” Adam also cares for animals and relates to them, indeed, is organically continuous with them. Not only are the animals made “out of the ground” like Adam (Gn 2:19), by giving them names Adam can develop a relationship; knowing a name opens the possibility of a relationship. Furthermore, as Biblical scholar George Ramsey (1988, pp. 34–35) explains, in naming the animals, Adam is “discerning something about the creatures—an essence which had already been established by God.” Naming, as Ramsey says, is an act of discernment, not of domination. Adam, then, is tied to the soil and other creatures, first through creation from the earth, and secondly through toil, that is, caring for them. Finally Eve comes into Adam’s life as “partner” (Gn 2:20; 3:20). Eve is “life”—here the Biblical text is a word play because in ancient Hebrew the word Eve resembles the word for life or living. Eve is the source of life, “the mother of all living” (Gn 3:20). In this ancient myth, “soil” and “life” are brought together integrally and intimately. So Adam and Eve are placed in this garden filled with fruit trees and even the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gn 2:16–17), a harmonious community typical of peasant utopic visions. The characteristics of this myth, molded to particular cultures, can be observed in peasant societies even today. In this sense, Adam and Eve are analogous to Andean peasants.

### 7.3 Andean Llama Stewardship

“Earth stewardship” is a metaphor that evokes a sense of responsibility and care beyond self-interest. It “recognizes value in the non-human creation other than its usefulness to humanity and gives humanity obligations to treat the nonhuman creation accordingly, while at the same time recognizing the unique degree of power over the rest of creation which human beings wield in modern times”

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of Sabbath. Other possibly pertinent texts include Psalms 8 and, for contrasting anthropologies, Psalms 90, 103:14–16 and 144:3–4; Job 38–41 reflects another creation and anthropological tradition. The specifically Christian corpus includes Mt 25:45–51; 25:14–31 and twin texts in Luke, among others, that might be considered pertinent. A discussion of these texts requires more space than is available in this article.

(Bauckham 2011, pp. 60–61). The importance of stewardship is that it imposes limits on human conduct. Rooted in the Sabbath tradition of Judaism and the Adam and Eve peasant tradition of ancient Hebrew society, “restraint, noninterference, and humility were an integral part of the original Jewish concept of stewardship, regardless of corruptions that may have taken place subsequently, and these restraining virtues may yet prevail” (Ehrenfeld and Bentley 2001, p. 126). Its importance for ethics and thus stewardship is that it contains within itself normative language. Yet, as metaphor, content is plastic, not exhaustive and hardly literal. Still it is powerful because it stimulates the moral imagination. Certainly in many respects, stewardship is a flawed concept, given its historical origins in hierarchical social and economic structures, yet when understood from the ancient Hebrew tradition of Adam and Eve and Sabbath, and re-read from peasant economies such as the Aymara, new insights are to be had. Finally stewardship is about how humans are to interact with the earth.

Andean llama stewardship is practiced in a framework of mutuality. Andean ethics is based on reciprocity. So far from “domination” or “power over”, this stewardship fosters a subject-subject relationship. That which is to be cared for is not an object but a subject worthy of respect. It nourishes “power with,” a symbiotic empowering. Llamas, the dung they produce, and the peasants who spread it on their fields, are all in a kind of reciprocal partnership. Following Larson’s discussion of environmental metaphors (2011, p. 119), stewardship, then, is a metaphor, that “[b]y emphasizing relationship... exemplif[ies] what has been called an ethic of partnership, as opposed to former ethics based on egocentrism, anthropocentrism, or even ecocentrism. This new ethic gives equal moral consideration to both the human and the nonhuman, thus balancing respect for biodiversity and cultural diversity.” Andean llama stewardship is a kind of “ethics of care” that emphasizes relationship and the well-being of animals and people: peasant farmers take care of the llamas, the llamas take care of the peasant farmers. Following the meaning of cultivation as nurturing service, Earth stewardship nurtures a healthy earth. Leopold tells us that “[h]ealth is the capacity of the land for self-renewal.” Paraphrasing him, we can say, “Stewardship is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity” (1949, p. 221).

### ***7.3.1 Biohistorical Anthropology***

Stewardship raises the question of anthropology. How should the human being be understood in this complex weaving called nature? Are humans to be considered a legitimate part of the natural order? What is their relationship to other living beings? These questions bear on the meaning of stewardship because it implies an anthropology.

Stewardship does not separate nature and society; furthermore, it understands humans as the artisans of history. In many respects it emphasizes the human situation, and that humans are not mere puppets of natural forces. Nor does stewardship



downplay human needs and their right to use nature for survival. Such anthropology and concern ought to be maintained. Nevertheless, an exclusionary anthropology ought to be avoided in favor of an anthropology that overcomes the dualism characteristic of many environmental ethics that counter-pose “biocentrism” to “anthropocentrism.” This can happen by understanding that the human being is not only biological but also cultural and lives historically; the human is an animal, but not just another animal.<sup>3</sup>

Rather, human beings are, as theologian Gordon Kaufman proposes, “biohistorical.” “This way of conceiving the human emphasizes our deep embeddedness in the web of life on planet Earth while simultaneously attending to the significance of our radical distinctiveness as a form of life” (Kaufman 2004, p. 42; cp Rozzi 1997). Or, in the words of Ricardo Rozzi, we are “biocultural” (Rozzi 1997, 2001, 2012). “Biology” and “culture” are merged in humans and this union makes humans different from other forms of life. Human beings do not lose their importance, nor are other forms of life excluded or less appreciated. As in the Adam and Eve story, humans remember themselves as creatures of the earth who can relate to other living creatures. Among the Aymara, as well as other peasant societies, human need is not put aside nor underestimated. Indeed, much of the Earth-caring these societies demonstrate is in order to assure human welfare. Llama dung is respected precisely because it enriches the fertility of the soil that produces food. Yet it would be erroneous to consider the Aymara and other peasant societies as anthropocentric for whom llama dung is only of instrumental value. Their relationship to the Earth is not that of master-servant.

The idea of people as biohistorical or biocultural creatures offers a holistic framework for discussing the meaning of stewardship. It provides a conceptual basis for stewardship as symbiotic mutualism, thus undermining dualisms such as anthropocentrism versus biocentrism, instrumental versus intrinsic value, or nature versus culture.

### **7.3.2 *Environmental Advocacy***

Andean llama stewardship, however, is not passive but rather proactive in the defense of the Earth through concrete actions on its behalf. The many rebellions by Aymara and other Andean indigenous people demonstrate this. The Earth steward is Earth advocate. Alterity is the philosophical mode for understanding environmental issues. This view understands the Earth as “other”, as the subaltern. This requires both an understanding of the modes and procedures that produce subalternity and political and other intervention to secure its liberation (Ortega 2011, p. 296). It denounces policies and activities that do not contribute to its health and announces ones that do. In this sense, stewardship is subversive of destructive policies and worldviews. Without Sabbath, stewardship becomes corrupted by power,

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<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of human uniqueness in relationship to other animals, see Van Huyssteen 2006.



“associated with instrumentalist attitudes to nature which are linked with environmental exploitation...” (Northcott 1996, p. 180). Inevitably then, stewardship is political and conflictive as it challenges powerful interests.

Earth stewardship is advocacy for justice. Justice is concerned with power relations and the consequences for life-possibilities of those relationships. The Hebrew Sabbath tradition had much to say about justice. This tradition not only is concerned with the right relationship of humans to each other and their social groupings, it also calls for right relationships to the land itself. The Jubilee (Lv 25), as synthesis of the Sabbath tradition, proclaimed liberty to both human captives and to the land. It ordered the redress of wrongs committed against people and the Earth and the (re) establishment of a just situation. Redressing wrong is the essence of justice in this tradition. It is rooted in the Mesopotamian tradition of the right of the wronged to clamor for redress. According to this ancient custom, a person who had been wronged, whose “rights” were violated, could “clamor” to the king, who, in turn, was obligated to hear the complaint and to rectify the injustice. The Earth also “clamors” for redress. “A deep chesty bawl echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of the night. It is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world,” wrote Leopold (1949, p. 129). The Earth steward is obligated to hear the “chesty bawl” and to redress.

## 7.4 Conclusion

Reading stewardship from the praxis of peasant societies such as the Aymara provides a perspective that emphasizes mutuality, care and protection, and advocacy for the well-being of the Earth and its many forms of life. It urges humanity as a vital and legitimate participant in nature, as biocultural or biohistorical beings. This stewardship is not a master-servant one, but rather a community of beings together for the welfare of all. In this community even llama dung commands respect.

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