Introduction

Framing an issue as a crossroads is one ethical resource that surfaced in what the German philosopher/historian Karl Jaspers (1953) named the Axial Age. Between the ninth and third centuries BCE, the emergence of several wisdom and faith traditions across multiple cultures signaled a qualitative shift in human social and cultural development: Confucianism and Taoism in East Asia, Buddhism and Hinduism in South Asia, the Hebrew prophets in Judaism in the Ancient Near East and the philosophers in Greece. These ancient wisdom and faith traditions in the Axial Age gave rise to remarkable developments in ethical resources and spiritual perspectives that transformed human culture at that time, and continue to provide an invaluable ethical legacy that still permeates our societies and economies today.

Within this Axial Age, this idea of the decision crossroads emerged in multiple cultures (e.g. Greek philosophy); however, this chapter will highlight how this heuristic tool was refined as one key idea inherited from the Hebrew prophets as they developed the ethical foundation for Judaism. The Jewish prophets took this insight of a crossroads and compressed it into a razor-sharp ethical dilemma of choosing life or death, a leitmotif that arcs over the Hebrew Biblical literature. For the prophets, engaging in social or environmental exploitation or oppressing other members of the community was effectively choosing the way of death. In contrast, to choose life was to align oneself with the moral order and goodness inherent in the natural world, replicating and enacting this ethical posture of compassion and justice in one’s relationships with other human and non-human members of the covenant (Habel and Trudinger 2008; Lysack 2015b).

In our time, climate change and environmental decline presents humanity with a similar existential crisis of deciding between two pathways. Scientific research confirms how the planet’s ecosystems are already nearing the limits of its carbon budget (Meinshausen et al. 2009) and moving beyond their key tipping points (Lenton 2011) into irreversible and dangerous climate change. To minimise the serious consequences, humanity must embark on a pathway of deep decarbonisation eliminating the use of fossil fuels and completely transitioning to renewable energy by no later than 2050. To accomplish this objective, global greenhouse emissions need to peak by 2020, and be on a downward track by 2025, if we are to avoid the worst impacts of climate change (Kolbert 2006).
This decision will not be a single action at one point in time, but rather a choice that needs to be made and re-made over and over again as actions of repeated re-commitment. Governments, decision-makers and the public will be required to re-commit themselves frequently to the challenge of the decarbonisation pathway and transitioning to renewable energy systems and zero-carbon economies. To maintain this trajectory, governments and the public will need to draw on a reservoir of ethical resources.

Among the ethical resources within the spiritual writings of the Hebrew prophetic tradition, this chapter will explore one specific resource that could provide orienting principles for a decarbonised society: the idea of the covenant community. Subsequently, the implications of this metaphor of a covenant community will be examined through the lenses of two leaders from two different sectors (economist Herman Daly and climate advocate Bill McKibben), identifying the key ethical resources and orienting principles arising from this idea of a covenant community that will enable the transition to a renewable energy economy. Finally, this chapter will conclude by highlighting the resources in social work that resonate with these ideas.

**The cosmic covenant as template for the zero-carbon, steady-state economy**

*Hebrew prophets: justice, sustainability and holiness*

Recent Biblical scholarship (Habel and Trudinger 2008) has pointed to an alternative worldview to our unsustainable extractive economy embedded in the Hebrew Bible, which provides resources for a position that is spiritually grounded, environmentally informed and politically empowering. In his landmark work, *The Cosmic Covenant*, Murray (1992) maintains that it is the Hebraic notion of a ‘cosmic covenant’ that offers the most promising framework for a spiritually-grounded environmental and justice ethic. In his nuanced exposition of the key Biblical ideas of the eternal covenant (*Berit olam*) and the covenant of peace (*Berit shalom*), Murray (1992) argues that they offer not only a socio-political perspective, but also a larger frame of the intrinsic moral order of the universe where there is an integrated unity of cosmos, nature and society. Northcott (1996: 168) emphasises that the ‘covenant is not simply between humans and God, as anthropocentric exegetes have traditionally held, but is rather a “cosmic covenant” involving all the orders of creation and linking them with the rituals, ethics and society of humans’.

This possibility that there are not two but actually three partners in the covenant – 1) God, 2) humanity and 3) all other species and creatures in ecological communities along with the land and the ecosystems – is a startling prospect (Brueggemann 2002). As the model of covenant community is mapped onto the social, political, economic and environmental dimensions of life, covenant is potentially a deeply ‘subversive paradigm’ that contains rich possibilities of ordering more just and compassionate relationships between people, God and the environment (Brueggemann 1994, 1999). In this framework, humanity and the ecological communities of the earth are covenant-partners with the Divine. Nor is it an option to conceptualise humanity as being in an exclusive covenant relationship with God (the dominant spiritual model), thereby reducing the environment to a source for raw resources for industrial production as well as a sewer for human waste. The health and wellbeing of humanity is inextricably linked with the health of the environment. All develop and flourish together, just as all suffer and deteriorate together. This idea is apparent in the assertion in Job that ‘you will be in covenant with the stones of the wild, and the wild beasts will be at peace with you’ (Job 5: 23).
Historically, the writings of the prophet Hosea are the earliest literary source for the description of the eternal covenant or ‘treaty’ established by the Divine. This covenant included an environmental dimension ‘with the wild animals, with the birds of heaven and the creeping things of the earth’ (Hosea 2: 18). Loya (2008) suggests that for the prophet Hosea, the violation of this covenant through spiritual infidelity, ecological destruction and social/economic oppression results in the suffering and grief of the earth. In the same time period, the prophet Amos (about 750 BCE), a farmer himself, criticises the rampant social and economic oppression by using elements of the earth as voices to call the people to return to the covenant relationship (Marlow 2008). Braaten (2008) maintains that in the prophet Joel (about 400 BCE), the natural world is pictured as calling humanity to identify with the covenant community through an environmental disaster of a locust invasion and the resulting devastation of agricultural resources. In the post-exilic period, the prophet Haggai (520 BCE) continued to remind the people of the vision of a sustainable and just society, encouraging reforms of land use and tenure in agricultural economies in harmony with covenant community principles expressed by earlier prophets.

Tension between covenant community and empire: sustainability and justice versus environmental exploitation and social injustice

This vision of the covenant community characterised by ecological sustainability and social justice continued to be expressed through the Hebrew prophets, and was also enacted in certain agricultural practices of the Sabbath of the Land (Exodus 23; Leviticus 25–26). However, this covenant community ideal was also continually resisted by the political and economic elites of the nation. A succession of Jewish kings sought to emulate the imperial tendencies of other countries in the Ancient Near East in the growth of its political economy, military expansion and architectural construction. Over time, these imperial tendencies finally exhausted the social and ecological resources of the country, resulting in a bloated ecological footprint that led finally to collapse through imperial ‘overstretch’ (Kennedy 1987). Excessive deforestation, agricultural over cropping and overgrazing by animals reduced a great portion of the fertile land to desert. An environmental reading of archaeological findings of cities, such as Jericho, Tyre and Jerusalem in Israel in the eighth century, suggests that an environmental crisis may have caused these cities to be abandoned, precipitated by the abuse that the land suffered during the imperial projects of the Jewish ruling classes (Ponting 1988).

While this ideal of the covenant community and its enactment in social and environmental practice proved to be highly resilient, the great imperial projects of the monarchy, exacerbated by the exploitative practices of the merchant class, not only created increasing economic disparity, but also environmental devastation of the earth community in the created order (Isaiah 5: 8–10). Isaiah sees the ecological degradation of the land and its biotic communities as the result of neglect or intentional resistance to the inherent moral order and goodness of nature (Northcott 1996, 2007).

The most evocative descriptions of this de-creation of creation itself may be found in Isaiah 24 and Jeremiah 4: 23–28, where the wellbeing of the social, political, economic, agricultural and environmental dimensions of life are fundamentally compromised. In these texts, the human community is portrayed as severely threatened. Social disorder and decline in spirituality are related to the ‘disruption of the order of nature’ (Murray 1992: 60). In our time of climate change and its effects of temperature rise, droughts and crop failures, the images in Isaiah 24: 1–13 are especially chilling:
Ravaged the earth … the earth is mourning, withering … the earth is polluted under 
the inhabitants feet, for they have … broken the everlasting covenant … that is why the 
inhabitants of the earth are burnt up and few people are left.

(Isaiah 24: 3–6)

A century later than Isaiah, the prophet Jeremiah (about 646–587 BCE) continued to enunciate 
the vision of the covenant community, and to perceptively denounce environmental devasta-
tion, economic exploitation and empty forms of piety. Jeremiah provided provocative critiques 
and passionate invitations for the nation to return to the values of the covenant community. 
Jeremiah deftly makes linkages between the religious, environmental and social/economic 
domains in his analysis of the environmental disturbances of his day, himself being a witness 
of local climate change and the transformation of the fertile land into lifeless deserts through 
overcropping, overgrazing and deforestation around 600 BCE (Northcott 2007).

Environmental ethicist Rasmussen (1996: 243) argues that the idea of the covenant community 
offers an integrated vision of the relationship between God, the environment and humanity that is 
salient not only to the ‘people of the Book’ (i.e. Jews, Muslims and Christians), but also ‘ethically 
charged’. As an environmental ethic rooted in ancient wisdom traditions and previous civiliza-
tions, the ‘covenant’ ethic integrates environmental sustainability, social justice and a robust spir-
itually-grounded ethic that underlines the centrality of environmental justice for the victimised 
and of healing of the wounded, be they human or non-human members of the earth community.

**Ethical principles for a sustainable economy**

Drawing on the model of a covenant community in the Hebraic prophetic literature, what ethi-
cal resources might be used as building blocks for a sustainable economy in an era of accelerating 
and irreversible climate destabilisation and environmental degradation? We now examine these 
ethical resources as developed by McKibben, environmental writer and the founder of 350.org 
(an advocacy NGO combatting climate change), and Herman Daly, former Senior Economist 
at the World Bank, and author of several key books in sustainable economics.

1. The earth’s ecological systems and biological communities have intrinsic environmental limits, and 
the recognition of these limits need to be the reference point for all decisions about energy, society and 
the economy. The concept of limits is woven through much of the literature that emerged 
from the wisdom and faith traditions: limits on the treatment of land, treatment of animals, 
restrictions on the amount harvested. Similarly, science has elucidated how the ‘natural 
environment places finite limits on our behavior’ (McKibben 2005: 8), and climate science 
research (Meinshausen et al. 2009) has demonstrated that the earth has a limit to the amount 
of carbon that can be burned and released in the atmosphere. As of 2012, the earth had a 
total carbon budget of 565 gigatons of carbon, beyond which the door closes irreversibly 
on any prospect of the planet staying below the scientifically-based goal from Conference 
of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21) in Paris in 
December 2015, of maintaining global warming to a level below 1.5°C.

2. Humanity needs to acknowledge that it has limits, despite the fact that science and technology 
has ceded increasing power to humanity, fostering the perception that we have no limits. 
Hence,

it is precisely because science and technology has given us such power that the scale 
of our economy has been able to grow to the point where we must now consciously
face the fundamental limits of creaturehood; finitude, entropy, and ecological dependence.

(Daly 1996: 214)

While it is true that the human species has enjoyed success in thriving in diverse habitats, as a creature, humanity too has an envelope of limits. As Daly (1996) continues:

The hard problem is overcoming our addition to growth as our favored way to assert our creative power, and our idolatrous belief—whether we think in religious terms or not—that our derived creative power is autonomous and unlimited.

(Daly 1996: 224)

3 There are serious adverse, deadly consequences, when environmental limits are violated. McKibben (2006: 8) describes violating environmental limits as ‘de-creation’, an unraveling of the tapestry of creation and the rhythms of nature that give us a sense of stability and home. Similarly, scientists continue to confirm the serious consequences of breaching the planet’s environmental limits, mapping out the early warning signs of tipping points (Lenton 2011) that signal the planet shifting into irreversible and dangerous climate change.

4 An ethic of restraint is critical if we are to reduce the danger that climate change poses for the human species and the planet as a whole. Hence, ‘We are different from the rest of the natural order, for the reason that we possess the possibility of self-restraint, of choosing some other way’ (McKibben 2006: xx). An ethic of restraint and an envelope of limits are germane to all wisdom and faith traditions that emerged in the Axial Age, and constitute the bridge between wisdom traditions and functional societies and economies. McKibben points out that humanity has exercised the ethic of restraint previously on other issues with some success, such as refraining from the use of nuclear weapons. While humanity has the capacity to extract every molecule of oil, gas and coal and burn it, we also have the capacity to choose not to burn it. In other words, ‘Should we so choose, we could exercise our reason to do what no other animal could do: we could limit ourselves voluntarily’ (McKibben 2006: 182).

5 Humanity needs to de-centre itself, and move to where it no longer perceives itself as the centre of the earth. Both our economy and culture is predicated on the ‘assumption that human beings are and should be at the centre of everything’ (McKibben 2005: 25). Instead, humanity needs to reclaim itself as one species among many, albeit a highly adaptive and intelligent species that now exercises an awesome degree of power over life on the planet. McKibben (2006: 146) perceptively asked, ‘What would it mean to our ways of life, … our economics, our output of carbon dioxide and methane, if we began to truly and viscerally to think of ourselves as just one species among many?’ In *shifting from an anthropocentric to a biocentric perspective*, humanity can orient itself within a larger web of life, one partner within a cosmic covenant of life, locating the earth rather than humanity in the centre. For the environmental ethicist Aldo Leopold (1966: 240), this new ethical perspective would ‘change the role of homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it’, who cares for the health of the land and planet. In so doing, humanity is freed from seeing the land as our ‘slave and servant’, and now able to experience the natural world as a ‘biotic community’ (Leopold 1966: 262) or covenant community. As a result, humanity then can shift from extractive and exploitative economics to a sustainable ethic, where something is ‘right when it tends to protect the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise’ (Leopold 1966: 262).
Ancient wisdom traditions reveal how humanity also perceived a patterning or order in nature reflected in how it is organised and functions. For these faith traditions and philosophies, these patterns reflected a moral order in the universe, within which humanity could prosper and thrive (Northcott 2007). These insights regarding patterning are reflected in contemporary practices of biomimicry (Benyus 2002) in science and industry, where humanity imitates these patterns and learns how to survive and thrive in diverse environments.

In the cosmic covenant community, nature was not assigned a value by humanity, but perceived as having an inherent value as part of a larger morally ordered cosmos. In other words, nature possesses intrinsic worth as part of a larger cosmic mystery. Daly (1996: 217) argues that all ‘living things have both instrumental value for other living things and intrinsic value by virtue of their own sentence and capacity to enjoy their own lives’. Such a perspective is in stark contrast to contemporary economics, where nature is devoid of any worth outside of human use, only having extrinsic or instrumental value as an inert resource for extraction, exploitation, consumption and finally disposal (McKibben 2005). Public policy regarding energy, city design and built environment, agriculture and forestry, fisheries and conservation all need to embed this orienting principle of nature possessing intrinsic worth at the heart of their policy development.

Necessity of a shift from short-term to long-term perspectives as well as from exclusive to more socially and ecologically inclusive orientations. The unsustainability of our current economic system is visible ‘by its practice of discounting the future, [and] is implicitly willing to say that beyond some point the future is worth nil and might as well end’ (Daly 1996: 220). In contrast, the ‘steady-state economy’ is a ‘way of keeping the rich from leaning too heavily on the poor and present generations from leaning too heavily on future generations’ (Daly 1996: 215). Not only is it socially inclusive, but it also includes all species in their ecological communities within their environmental support systems in the planet.

Decentring the primacy of the economy. The dominant economic model currently centres on the understanding that the economy is the total system and is unconstrained in its growth by anything. This vision concedes that nature may be finite, but sees it as just a sector of the economy for which other sectors can substitute without limiting overall growth in any important way.

(Daly 1996: 219)

In this understanding, the human economy encompasses everything else, and the environment is a subsystem of the human economy. However, as impacts of climate change multiply and cascade through the planet’s living systems and our economy, of necessity, humanity will be forced either to react passively, or to rapidly transition to an economy that is an ‘open subsystem of a larger but finite, non-growing, and closed ecosystem on which it is fully dependent’ (Daly 1996: 219). Wendell Berry (2010) makes a similar point when he describes the ‘Great Economy’ (the natural world) as being the envelope within which the human ‘small economy’ can thrive, rather than the reverse.

Design economies based on oikonomía, which is Aristotle’s term from which we derive the words ‘ecology’ and ‘economy’. Oikonomía is the management of the household so as to increase its use value to all members of the household over the long run. If we expand the scope of household to include the larger community of the land, of shared values, resources, biomes, institutions, language, and history, then we have a good definition of “economics for community”.

(Daly and Cobb 1994: 138)
A renewable energy economy

The key characteristics of oikonomia are as follows:

First, it takes the long-run rather than the short-run view. Second, it considers costs and benefits to the whole community, not just to the parties to the transaction. Third, it focuses on concrete use value and the limited accumulation thereof, rather on abstract exchange value and its impetus toward unlimited accumulation.

(Daly and Cobb 1994: 139)

Policy influencing for a sustainable economy and climate/environmental protection: social work resources

These faith and ethical principles have consequences for social work as a profession, while social workers also have an opportunity and responsibility to contribute to the larger shift to a new renewable energy economy and climate protection. What are the contributions that social work could make to this larger transition? John Coates is one of the first scholars to begin writing about ecology and social work, combining his integration of these two fields with a strong political and economic awareness and deep spiritual sensibility. Coates has developed a substantive critique of the dominant economic order of consumerism and the relentless growth that is driving the degradation of the planet’s ecological communities, locating the root causes of this deterioration in the current economy and modernity. Coates’ (2003a, 2003b) analysis of modernity’s beliefs and values is summarised as: 1) primacy of the economic order, 2) industrialism, 3) consumerism, 4) materialism, 5) the myth of progress and 6) individualism. In his analysis of the current economy/society and his exploration of alternatives, Coates articulates principles quite similar to the model of covenant community explored earlier and to the sustainable economy proposed by Daly.

By way of practices, Coates (2007) suggests that through their relational and contextual thinking and their relationship skills, ecosocial workers can mitigate the negative forces of industrialism, consumerism, commodification of the earth’s commons and pathological individualism, aiding in the development of intentional communities that regard the earth as sacred. He also insists that an ‘important role for social work will be that of prophet, of readying individuals and communities to support the transformation in values and lifestyle which will be required if sustainability and social justice are to be attained’ (Coates 2000, emphasis added).

With the gap between developed and developing nations, this ethically grounded consciousness also includes a climate and environmental justice mandate that recognises the differential impacts of environmental degradation and climate change on the marginalised peoples of the planet (Coates 2007; Lysack 2008). In describing the political involvement that is necessary to address environmental degradation, Besthorn (2003) proposes both a critical stance of the current political and economic structures, and environmental advocacy as a sustained struggle against the social and economic forces that are the life-support system of environmental deterioration.

Like other social workers who engage in policy influencing to achieve climate protection objectives such as phasing out coal (Lysack 2015a), Dominelli (2011: 430) argues that fighting climate change is not a marginal or fringe activity for social work, but rather a critical imperative, arguing that the profession has an important role to play in ‘promoting sustainable energy production and consumption; mobilising people to protect their futures through community social work; and proposing solutions to greenhouse gas emissions’. As community-based social work, Dominelli (2011: 435) lists the practices of ‘advocacy and community mobilisation around green technologies to enhance the quality of life in disadvantaged localities and reduce carbon
emissions... [by promoting] clean renewable energy’. At the macro-practice level, she encourages the development of skill sets among social workers that include ‘lobbying for preventative measure taken at local ... national and international levels by advocating policy changes ... and dialoguing with policy makers and using the media to change policies’ (Dominelli 2011: 437).

Social workers have invaluable conceptual and practice skills for facilitating cross-sector environmental leadership in government, business, civil society, and communities and pressing for environmental, economic and social policy changes that would transition communities and countries from fossil fuel economies to a renewable energy economy and sustainable communities. Many social work skills, such as facilitating group processes in coalitions and networks of professionals and allies (Lysack 2015a) and building capacity for environmental engagement and leadership (Lysack 2012a), are transferable to comparable skill sets of professionals engaged in advocacy and policy influencing for transitioning to a renewable energy economy (Hoefer 2016). Drawing on the strategies and tactics emerging from social movements in history, such as the abolition of slavery movement in England (Lysack 2012b), social workers can also adapt these tools of social change in the current context in order to accelerate the change in our economy and energy systems. In addition, social workers can utilise the conceptual resources from research into the role of emotion and an ethical posture on environmental protection, translating these tools into practices for nurturing the development of committed environmental citizenship (Lysack 2013) as a foundation for transformational change through public engagement.

Scientists have worked hard on solving the difficult scientific problem of climate change, its tipping points and impacts on the earth’s systems and ecological communities (Lenton 2011), and the rapidly dwindling carbon budget of the planet (Meinshausen et al. 2009). They remind us with urgency, the time for avoiding the worst of dangerous climate is short, and effective and bold action is required. As McKibben (2013: 255) insists, as he reflects on both the imperative and opportunity for action: ‘The old cycle we’ve always known is very nearly gone, but not quite. It lingers still, and while it does the fight is worth the cost.’

References
A renewable energy economy

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