Overview:

The task of this particular book is to bring to light a new understanding of the Bible by means of reading the texts in a new manner that reflects their origins within an agrarian society. It should be noted that in this case “the Bible” refers more specifically to the writings of the Old Testament, which was written in a time and place that was heavily steeped in agrarian culture. Although the focus of the book is Old Testament writings, it should be noted that Davis sees this as a means of re-orienting the manner in which we read biblical texts, so that the perspective of reading from an “agrarian” point of view can likewise be applied to the books of the New Testament as well. This book is written as a collection of 9 essays that are all connected to this overarching project of an agrarian reading of the Bible, but certainly the essays can be read individually or as a whole depending upon one’s interests or focus. The essays are arranged in a sequential fashion in the order in which they appear within the Old Testament cannon, and most often the essays are reflective of a particular passage(s) from that chosen text. This being said, certain essays tend to be more exegetical in nature, while other essays are written in a more theological nature, but regardless of style, this text according to the author (and my own reading) is indeed meant to be accessible for those with theological education as well as those who see a connection between their faith and ecology. All of this comes together in a book that could certainly be utilized by a study group within a congregation as well as in a seminary classroom. The introduction to this book is absolutely pivotal to providing the needed background for a meaningful engagement with the text. It points to a variety of truths that underpin everything that is to follow including:

- A working definition of “agrarianism” (pp. 1) as “a way of thinking and ordering life in community that is based on the health of the land of living creatures.”
- The notion that modern agriculture is currently the biggest threat to biodiversity.
- A sense of “urban ignorance” with regards to agriculture is a modern phenomenon that can lead to further conflict with creation.
- The perspective being written from is one that of a citizen of industrialized North America, although the concepts are presumable universally applicable.

The ultimate task of this book is to bring the reader to a renewed sense of how it was that
the agrarian culture from which the Bible (Old Testament especially) emerged was and continues to be deeply concerned with care for creation and preservation of biodiversity, recognizing the intricacies of human relationships with the rest of creation and calling forth a renewed concern for living in a relationship with creation that fosters its growth and maintains its biodiversity.

Chapter Synopses:

1. Rupture and Re-membring

This chapter is the first step towards getting the reader to move towards a new perspective for reading the Bible. It begins by pointing to the truth that the ecological problems of today are more than scientific issues, but instead are deeply rooted in ethical and theological concerns as well. The overall destruction of the land is a failure on behalf of humans, and a failure that must be recognized as such before it can be tended to. Davis sets forth the concern that modern “agri-business” has essentially destroyed the family-based farming economy that undergirds society in the times of the Bible, and ultimately this shift is responsible for the ecological concerns we have today (including chemically ridden and eroded topsoil to depletion of water sources and chemical poisoning as a result of runoff). This notion of “re-membring” means returning to a way of life that honors wholeness in creation. Davis sets forth the proposal that the ecological crises of today are a sign of a broken covenant with God and points to the prophet Jeremiah to make a two-fold statement: ¹“creation is bound into a single covenanted unity” (i.e. deeply interrelated), and ²humans have a delimited role governed by divine teachings and the consequences of failure affect all of flesh and creation.

2. Reading the Bible Through Agrarian Eyes

This chapter is vital to the whole project, because it is in this particular chapter that Davis sets forth notion of “reading the Bible through agrarian eyes”, the very thing that, for Davis, may allow for people to understand how faith merges with ecological concerns and a call to action. Davis argues that reading the works of modern agrarian writers can lead individuals to become better readers of scripture, because it provides the individual with the necessary vocabulary. Davis points to two competing ethics: ¹“Productionist” (getting land to produce as much as possible regardless of ecological costs), and ²”Land Ethic” (a “biblical” view that calls for humans and land to exist in “biotic unity” before God). The rest of the chapter is delineated by a consideration of four aspects of contemporary agrarian thinking in relationship to biblical land
These aspects range from the notion that care of land should first and foremost be the concern of humanity over its production to the notion that land itself is invaluable – in a biblical perspective it cannot be owned because its ultimate use is long-term (generational) perspective. This chapter is very key for understanding at a basic level what it means to think from an agrarian perspective and does an excellent job at presenting the manner in which humans today simply misunderstand their role with regards to care of creation.

3. Seeing with God: Israel’s Poem of Creation

This chapter begins the deeper exegetical approaches to the topic at hand, but it should be noted that it is still very accessible. It begins by stating the history of readings of Genesis including the Priestly account (Gen. 1), which points to humans as the land’s master that coerces it into service as well as the Yahwist account (Gen. 2) which puts humans in the role of the land’s servants as demanded by the power of the land in creation itself. Davis argues in this chapter that Genesis 1 and the meaning found therein must be understood of as a liturgical poem that conveys its meaning aesthetically. Such an approach of reading opens the words up to deeper and perhaps even multiple meanings. Davis considers the use of the phrase “good” in this story and how its repetition points us to recognize that the ecological failures can be traced back to our inability to recognize the inherent goodness of creation. Davis further considers the manner in which humans today have intentionally limited the diversity of creation inherent in creation by artificial means including GURTs (Genetic Use Restoration Technologies) and “Terminator” technologies, both of which reflect the lack of agricultural connection with the land in current times. This chapter then ends with a consideration of the command to “conquer” the land in Genesis 2 as a call to playing into the need for hospitable order, and a recognition that the gift of land can be lost if such order, which Davis argues doesn’t exist today, is present. This chapter is key to the overall flow of the book because it attends to the very creation texts themselves and reads them critically.

4. Leaving Behind Egypt Embracing the Wilderness Economy

This chapter considers the time spent by the Israelites under Egyptian control and their eventual exodus from captivity. The crux of the chapter revolves around the contrasting ideologies and lifestyles existent then and now: ¹agrarian (Israelites), and ²dominant industrialized culture (ancient Egyptians and Western world today). Davis considers the role of Manna in the exodus narrative as an exemplar of agrarian ideals concerning the preciousness of
food, the revelation of God through the gift of food, and principle of “restraint” including the use of Sabbath. This chapter juxtaposes the economically driven food production of industrialized societies (including Egypt then and the Western world today) against the subsistence lifestyle practiced by agrarian cultures. This chapter makes excellent connections between the biblical stories of the past and the world we live in today.

5. A Wholesome Materiality

This chapter focuses heavily on the text of Leviticus and points to the “wholesome materiality” that exists within this writing that points to work, eating and worship practices within the larger design of creation. Davis states “the profound vision of complexity and interdependence of created order grapples with the question of how humans may responsibly participate in that order.” (pp. 83) Ultimately Davis argues that this responsible living with the land is a result of covenant practices and a “re-membering” of the land. Davis points to an analogical reading of these texts as a means to connect them with our farming and eating practices today pointing to truths of the costs of Genetic Technologies (hybridization) and the preparation of food as not only ancient laws, but an analogical exemplar of remaining in proper relationship/covenant with God and creation today. This is an excellent chapter that brings the reader to look more closely at a part of the Bible often glossed over by Christians and connects it to agricultural practices of today.

6. Covenantal Economics: The Biblical Case for a Local Economy

This chapter connects closely with the previous one in use of covenantal language, and therefore it is recommended to read them in conjunction with one another. This chapter looks closely at the idea of “local economy” as a divergence from mainstream culture, and how it functions in biblical notions of land possession. In this chapter Davis proposes that local economies actually lead to increase in productivity of the land and better maintain the covenant with God in care, not ownership, of the land. The end of the chapter makes an argument for “community farming”, which links more closely the urban/suburban lifestyles with that of farming communities, and returns to the ancient practices of agricultural developments within cities themselves and not merely in the “hinter-lands”. This is a great chapter if one is considering starting programs like urban or community gardens or perhaps farmer markets.
7. Running on Poetry: The Agrarian Prophets

This chapter focuses closely on the prophets and how it was that their “agrarian poetry” served as the primary vehicle for inscribing a new social vision in the 8th c. BCE and how these texts can serve as a response likewise to the present ecological crisis as well. Davis considers the writings of Amos and the use of the phrase “arable lands” pointing to the restoration of the productivity of the soil and land itself. Davis also points to Hosea and the Song of Solomon, making reference to the farming imagery that stands amidst the sexual imagery in the latter. This chapter was a little more difficult to follow and would seemingly have less connection to the overall goal of the book than any of the other chapters.

8. Wisdom or Sloth? The Character of Work

Davis points out the warning of Gen. 3:17-18 with regards to the challenge of eating adequately and the response of modern times to simply apply further manipulation to answer these struggles and concerns. This chapter looks at the notion of “sloth” (herein meaning the opposite of “good work” with regards to creation) as it is challenged in the design and construction of the Tabernacle as well as in the portrayal of the “Valorous Woman” in Proverbs, both of which point to the ultimate wisdom and respect that is needed for God’s work in creation. This chapter provides a biblically grounded exegetical analysis of these two texts, which bring them alive from a different ecologically, based perspective, ultimately pointing to the need for “good work” as it is understood in the Bible.

9. The Faithful City

This final chapter connects deeply with Chapter 6 as it likewise picks up on the strand of the role of cities with regards to proper care of creation, citing Jerusalem as kind of case study. Davis begins by citing how it is that the Bible (think Babel for example) does not often praise cities, but often associates them with destruction, and how it is that such a perspective is reflective of an agrarian point of view. Davis then shifts once again to consider the role of urban agriculture and ecological concerns citing case studies of the changing city of Detroit, Michigan as well as the sense of interdependency of urban and rural areas by example of the New York City Water Protection Project. This chapter is excellent in its synthesis of the previous chapters and its reliance on and use of modern case studies.
Closing Thoughts:

There is little doubt that this book is an excellent example of a scholarly piece that synthesizes biblical texts and ecological concerns, especially food production and relationship with the land, in an effort to connect the Bible to the lives of modern day readers. As a whole the book is very accessible and provides a variety of textual study opportunities. There are certainly points in the book where one can get lost as to how it is connecting to the overall project of the book, but these points are few and far between in this otherwise very well written and thought out book. This book opens up much room for discussion and serves as a good entry into how faith connects with the ecological issues of the modern world.