

# **ECOLOGY AND BIBLE – PRINCIPLES for Interpretation**

- 1. The Adelaide Declaration**
- 2. The Earth Bible Principles**
- 3. Guiding Ecojustice Principles**
- 4. Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics**

## ***1. The Adelaide Declaration* on Religion and the Environment**

From 21-23 November 1997, a Consultation on Religion and the Environment was held in Adelaide, Australia, under the auspices of the Adelaide College of Divinity and the Charles Strong Trust. The consultation included professionals, academics and members of religious communities interested in justice for Earth.

The following declaration is a public statement of concern released by the participants of the consultation.

1. As people of religious conviction, we have various ways of discerning the Earth to be sacred. We confess that we have sinned against Earth defiled the land, polluted the seas and the atmosphere, violated the forests and devalued God's creation.
2. As members of the Earth community, we commit ourselves to joining with the Earth community in its struggle for justice, by listening to the cries of the whole Earth community, and working with the Earth community to repair the damage done to God's Earth. We also commit ourselves to working with the whole Earth community to nurture all life, both sentient and non-sentient, and to developing ways of living that sustain all life.

3. We respect the deep spiritual and physical interconnectedness which Aboriginal peoples of Australia experience with the land and life in the land and we urge all religious communities in Australia to honour these indigenous peoples from whom we can continually learn ways for working toward justice for the whole Earth community. In cooperation with our indigenous brothers and sisters, we promise to support the development of strategies for reaching, by the year 2001, a basis for full reconciliation.
4. We acknowledge, especially at this time, the threat to the global climate and the inevitable destruction of island habitats caused by the increasing use of greenhouse gases and call upon religious communities of Australia to demand that the federal and state governments not only conform to the recommended target for reduction of these gases but also go beyond it, and take an ecologically responsible lead in developing, and encouraging the widespread use of alternative sources of clean energy throughout our community. We also affirm the attempts of religious communities throughout Australia to ensure that companies in which they invest are ecologically responsible.
5. We call on the religious communities of Australia to participate in the worldwide jubilee movement, which is calling for a once-off cancellation of the Third World debts for poor countries. Servicing these external debts involves the haemorrhaging of vast sums of money from poor countries to rich ones. In addition, the burden of debt servicing falls disproportionately on the poor, and has dire consequences for the environment.
6. The Christians attending the consultation recommend to the Christian communities of Australia that they extend the liturgical celebrations planned for the Year 2000 to incorporate nationwide rites of confession (modelled on the Stations of the Cross), at 14 locations throughout Australia and the Antarctic where the Earth is suffering because of human acts of destruction, on 21 April 2002 (the day Christians observe Good Friday). These rites will be followed by a celebration for renewing the Earth on 11 June 2000 (the day Christians celebrate Pentecost). Participants in the consultation urge members of other religious communities to find comparable ways of recognising the suffering of the Earth, and celebrating the Earth's renewal, on the same day in the year 2000.

## **2. The Earth Bible Principles**

The Earth Bible principles were developed largely by the Earth Bible Team in Adelaide in consultation with writers in Ecology. They are worded in such a way to facilitate dialogue between biblical scholars and ecologists. The articles in The Earth Bible reflect ways in which various scholars seek to read the text from the perspective of Earth, taking into account one or more of these principles. For a more detailed analysis of these principles see 4 below: ***Guiding Ecojustice Principles: Earth Bible Volume One, Chapter Two.***

### **1. The Principle of Intrinsic Worth**

*The universe, the Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value.*

### **2. The Principle of Inter-connectedness**

*The Earth is a community of inter-connected living things which are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.*

### **3. The Principle of Voice**

*The Earth is a living entity capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.*

### **4. The Principle of Purpose**

*The universe, the Earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.*

### **5. The Principle of Mutual Custodianship**

*The Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners with, rather than rulers over, the Earth to sustain its balance and diversity.*

### **6. Principle of Resistance**

*The Earth and its components not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans, but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.*

# 3. Guiding Ecojustice Principles

## Chapter Two in Earth Bible Volume One

### Introduction

The principles enunciated in this chapter are the basic understandings about ecojustice that are shared by those who have developed the Earth Bible series. This set of principles have been developed over several years in dialogue with ecologists and their writings, some of whom, like Thomas Berry, have developed their own distinctive sets of ecological principles (Berry, ). The principles formulated here have been refined in consultations and workshops concerned with both ecology in general and the relationship between ecology and theology or the Bible.

These principles serve several purposes. First, they identify the ecological orientation of the Earth Bible series, though particular writers are free to dialogue with these principles and offer variations relevant to a given text or topic. Second, they embrace specific ecological values consistent with the basic approach, the aims of which are articulated at the end of the previous chapter. Third, they provide a basic set of statements that provoke the key questions we pose as we seek to read and interpret the biblical text.

One feature of these principles, which is immediately obvious to those with a theological interest, is that the specific terms 'God' and 'creation' are not employed in the wording of the principles. This formulation has been chosen to facilitate dialogue with biologists, ecologists, other religious traditions like Buddhism and scientists who may not function with God or God's creation as an *a priori* assumption. This formulation also forces the interpreter to focus on the Earth itself as the object of investigation in the text rather than on the Earth as God's creation or property.

These principles are not intended to be exhaustive and writers may wish to complement them with additional principles. There is no principle, for example, which explicitly links the plight of oppressed peoples of the Earth with the plight of the Earth. Clearly social justice and ecojustice are closely connected in many contexts. Nor will writers find all of these principles useful in reading a given biblical text afresh. Any one of these principles, however, may provide the stimulus needed to pose new questions as we converse with the text, become conscious of the Earth's presence in the text or join the struggle of the Earth for justice.

### Suspicion, Retrieval and Dualism

A helpful way of using these principles to pose questions of the text is follow the basic model of feminist scholars introduced in the previous chapter and use a model of suspicion and retrieval (Schussler Fiorenza, 1985). The suspicion aspect of this model means that we may legitimately **suspect** that biblical texts, written by human beings reflect a primary interest in human beings-their human welfare, their

human relationship to God and their personal salvation. In short, we can expect biblical texts to be anthropocentric.

Even where scholars have insisted that texts are theocentric rather than anthropocentric in character, the writer may ultimately be more concerned about God's relation to humanity or a group within humanity than about God's relation to the Earth or the Earth community as a whole. The Bible has long been understood as God's book for humans. And for those of us who have been reading biblical texts that way for years, this understanding has come to be self-evident. Should we not then, with a new ecological consciousness, legitimately suspect that the text and its interpreters have been understandably anthropocentric?

The second aspect of this model involves detecting features of the text to **retrieve** traditions about the Earth or Earth community that have been unnoticed, suppressed or hidden. The task before us is to re-read the text to discern where the Earth or members of the earth community may have suffered, resisted or been excluded by attitudes within the text or the history of its interpretation. The task demands a strategy for reclaiming the sufferings and struggles of the Earth, a task that involves regarding the wider Earth community as our kin.

There is a strong possibility that biblical texts may be more sympathetic to the plight and potential of the Earth than our previous interpretations have allowed, even if the ecological questions we are posing arise out of a contemporary Earth consciousness. This is suggested by the very title of Gene Tucker's presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1996: 'Rain on a Land Where No One Lives.' (1997, 3). Some texts may even celebrate the Earth in a way that our contemporary anthropocentric eyes have not detected or have regarded as the quaint language of ancient poetry. Is it 'only poetry' when the Psalmist asserts that 'the heavens/skies are telling the glory of El' (Ps. 19.1)? The verses that follow speak of a genuine message coming from parts of creation in a form that is other than human 'words'. (Ps. 19.1-4)

We also need to consider the possibility that there are suppressed Earth traditions that resist the dominant patriarchal anthropocentric orientation of the text. By counter-reading the text it may be possible to identify alternative voices that challenge or subvert the normative voice of the dominant tradition. Whether these sub-texts point to the continuing voice of Canaanite traditions still in touch with the Earth, or whether these alternative perspectives arose as a mode of resisting the patriarchal orientation of monotheistic Yahwism is a task for further exploration.

One of the reasons for this blind spot in our interpretive work as readers of an ancient text, is that we are still influenced by the various dualisms about reality. This view of reality has developed since biblical days but because these dualisms are so much part of our Western view of reality, we may assume they are necessarily found in the biblical text. The key elements of the dualistic structure of Western thought are outlined by Plumwood (1993, 43). These include, among others, the following sets of contrasting pairs:

culture / nature

reason	/	nature
male	/	female
mind, spirit	/	body (nature)
reason	/	matter
reason	/	emotion (nature)
rationality	/	animality (nature)
human	/	nature (non-human)
civilised	/	primitive (nature)
production	/	reproduction (nature)
freedom	/	necessity (nature)
subject	/	object

To this listing, in the context of our project, I would add the following closely related pairs:

animate	/	inanimate
spiritual	/	material
heavenly	/	earthly
heaven	/	earth
sacred	/	profane

These dualistic pairs are deliberately listed here as background for the discussion which follows in connection with the six principles, each of which articulates an ecological view of reality which challenges at least one of these traditional pairings. It is immediately apparent from these pairings that the realities associated with the human pole of the pairing are understood to be superior in some way to the nature pole of the pairing. These dualisms necessarily devalue the earth as belonging to the weak side of the pairings. Do these pairings reflect genuine dualisms in the ancient biblical text, or are they complementary opposites within the structure of the cosmos, or are they discerned there because of the dualistic vision of Western readers?

Perhaps the most destructive form of this dualism developed as a result of the mechanistic approach of Descartes and his successors. Ponting quotes Descartes and analyses his position in the following way:

This tendency was reinforced by a mechanistic approach to natural phenomena, which can again be traced back to Descartes who wrote, 'I do not recognise any difference between the machines made by craftsmen and the various bodies that nature alone composes'...His mechanistic view of the world seemed to be vindicated by the spectacular success of Newton in the late seventeenth century in applying physical laws, such as that governing the force of gravity, to explain the workings of the universe. (1991, p. 147)

Philosophers and scientists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century pressed the dualism of medieval Christianity to its logical conclusion. They viewed earth as a machine, God as the great designer of the machine and humans as beings fashioned to determine the workings of the machine and run it for the benefit of humans. As modern interpreters we are still influenced by this heritage. We are obliged to make a conscious paradigm shift if we are to view the world in terms of complementary opposites rather than Western antagonistic and hierarchical dualisms.

Before discussing the principles in detail, it is important to recognise that because Earth and women have traditionally been associated on the same side of these dualistic pairings, Earth has been viewed as female, as 'Mother Earth', or as 'Mother Nature'. We are clearly avoiding any such equation in this study, referring to the Earth as 'it' rather than 'she.' To regard Earth as 'she' as a matter of course is to impose the language of social domination on a part of our physical world. And, as Rosemary Ruether insists,

Any ecological ethic must always take into account the structures of social domination and exploitation that mediate domination of nature and prevent concern for the welfare of the whole community in favour of the immediate advantage of the dominant class, race and sex. (1989, p. 149)

Is Earth, in our minds as readers, already viewed as material rather than spiritual, natural rather than rational, and therefore inferior? Is the Earth assumed, a priori, to be 'inferior' to heaven? The task of transcending this dualistic form of Western thinking may not be easy, but the Earth Bible project is designed to facilitate that process. Our aim is to recognise our kinship with all members of the Earth community and to assume a posture of empathy and partnership with the Earth, rather than assume dominion over Earth as partners with a hierarchal deity above the Earth. In so doing, we will also seek to retrieve biblical traditions that may be consistent with the ecojustice principles enunciated below.

## **1. The Principle of Intrinsic Worth**

*The universe, the Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value.*

This ecological principle is fundamental for developing an ethic, a theology or a hermeneutic that seeks to promote justice for the Earth. This principle asserts that the Earth, and its components, have value of themselves, not because they have utilitarian value for humans living on the planet, nor because they are vehicles that reflect the Creator's handiwork. Nor is this intrinsic value to be confined to sentient or living beings. All of Earth, as a complex of ecological systems, and all the components of those systems from rocks to rainbows, have worth because of what they are in these systems. The question before us as we approach the text is whether the Earth so understood, is respected and honoured by the voices in the text.

Given the history of Western thought, we may assume that biblical interpreters have read the text in terms of the dualities dominant in their society. In this context heaven is viewed as spiritual, superior, pure and eternal. The Earth is correspondingly viewed as material, inferior, corrupt and transitory. We may suspect, at the outset, that the biblical materials reflect a similar dualism-especially if we have imbibed the spirituality of hymns based on the Book of Hebrews where heaven is apparently depicted as our true home and Earth as a motel for passing pilgrims (Heb. 11.13-16). In such hymns this earthly domain is 'very evil,' a place where 'exiles mourn,' while heaven is a 'sweet and blessed country,' an endless 'land of rest'. (Lutheran Hymnal, 1941, # 605)

The task before us is to ascertain whether a given biblical text reflects the kind of dualisms we have inherited in the Western world, or whether a different cosmology is reflected. The second task involves discerning whether any such alternative cosmology, where it can be identified, honours the Earth and its components in terms of intrinsic worth, or whether the Earth in that cosmology is negated and relegated to a position of secondary value.

The point can be illustrated by the language of the first verse of Genesis. The Hebrew expression *hashemayim weha`arets* has been traditionally translated 'heaven and earth'. This expression has the potential for being read as a dualism embracing two opposing cosmic domains. If, however, the expression is rendered 'sky and land' the meaning is radically different. Land and sky are two complementary parts of the known physical world of the ancient Near East. According to my reading of Genesis 1 (in the first article of volume 2) the Earth is highly honoured and not made inferior to the sky.

Can the same be said of the cosmology of Isa. 66.2, where sky/heaven is declared to be God's throne and the Earth/land is God's footstool. In this passage the *shemayim* is no longer the sky as a part of the physical world, but the locus of God's presence and power as ruler over the Earth. The posture of the earth as a subject of this ruler is represented by the image of a 'footstool'. Even if the emphasis in the text lies on the limited perspective of those who viewed the temple as God's abode, the Earth is devalued in relation to heaven. Heaven is God's abode; the Earth is God's property. The reader who dares to assume the posture of the Earth, hears the voice of a controlled subject beneath God's feet. In this tradition, the Earth is demeaned even if we are hesitant to admit it.

In many interpretations, the Earth is understood to be valued or 'good' precisely because God has invested the Earth with value. The expression 'and God saw that X was good' in Genesis 1 is often viewed as a formula of divine pronouncement or approbation. This literary critical language is misleading. It is preferable to speak of an event, a divine reaction. When God sees the light (v. 4) or the Earth emerge from the waters (v.10). God reacts to what God sees, and what God sees is good. The Earth and the components of the Earth in Genesis 1 are valued as 'good' by God when God discovers them to be so, not because God pronounces them to be so. In Genesis 1, the Earth is 'good' of itself. Are there other biblical passages where the same affirmation of Earth can be retrieved?

## **2. The Principle of Inter-connectedness**

*The Earth is a community of inter-connected living things which are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.*

One of the most sobering and significant outcomes of the ecological movement is a growing awareness that the Earth is not a controlled or mechanical structure consisting of independent parts governed by the so-called laws of nature. Each species and each member of each species are connected by complex webs of interrelationships. Humans, too, are dependent on the fields, the forests, the trees, the air and the wide diversity of life that inhabits these domains. Humans are an integral

part of what has come to be called the 'Earth community'; humans are Earth-bound. All breathing creatures inhale the same air. According to Birch, 'Every molecule of oxygen in the planet comes from plants. All the oxygen is completely recycled by living organisms every two thousand years' (1993, 18). We breathe today the same air once breathed once recycled by the cedars of Lebanon.

Traditional Western thought has assumed that male humans are beings of a different order than other life forms. In terms of this human/nature dualism, male humans are superior beings possessing mind, reason, soul, language and spiritual consciousness; male humans are the creators of culture. Other forms, including women, whether animate or inanimate, are believed to be inferior, possessing, at best, certain basic natural instincts but lacking the higher faculties given to male humans.

When approaching a text that relates to the Earth or any part of the Earth community, we may suspect that the history of interpretation has been anthropocentric regarding the rest of the Earth community, and the Earth itself, as inferior creations. We may suspect that male interpreters have massaged their own egos by highlighting references to the higher standing and nature of humans, especially men. We may expect that biblical texts themselves exalt humans over other creatures even if their writers do not reflect the sharp dualism of later Western thought.

In Psalm 8 the reflection of the psalmist on the nature of humans seems to be unequivocally anthropocentric. The order of things seems to be a carefully structured hierarchy in which humans are 'a little less than the gods' and the animal world is under their domination. Kieth Carley explores this anthropocentric hierarchy in his article on Psalm 8 in this volume. Is this orientation assumed in most biblical passages which deal with the connection between humans and the wider Earth community?

One way of highlighting the interconnectedness of the ecosystems of Earth is to focus on the kinship of these systems. Philip Hefner argues that such kinship is integral to our very identity as humans. Science, he argues, has demonstrated quite clearly that humans are 'indissolubly part of nature, fully natural' (1995, 121). He continues,

On the basis of these scientific perspectives, there can be little doubt that homo sapiens is nature's creature. How are we related to the rest of nature. We flourish only within an intimate ecological fabric, and within the relationships of that fabric, we are kin to the other citizens of nature's society. Our interrelatedness is best conceptualised according to the model of genetic relatedness. Nature's processes have produced us, we are constituted by our inheritance from its past and we live in the ambience of its created balances today. There is a kind of non-negotiability to the message that science delivers on this point. Our kinship with nature is not a matter of our preference, nor is it an issue that calls for our acquiescence. It simply is. (1995, p. 122)

The task before us then, as we read a given text in the light of this principle, is to discern whether a dualistic or hierarchical structure is assumed, or whether traditions can be retrieved which affirm an interconnection and interdependence between the domains of the biological world as well as between this world and human beings. Are there texts which indicate that humans are one with the earth, kin with the animals and an integral part of an integrated earth community?

### 3. The Principle of Voice

*The Earth is a living entity capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.*

There is a growing consciousness among many biologists, ecologists, feminists and theologians that the Earth is a living entity, both biologically and spiritually. Deep ecologists argue that the Earth functions more like a living organism than a machine governed by rigid laws. According to the Gaia Hypothesis of James Lovelock the earth is itself alive, sustaining and regulating its own environment. Sally McFague uses the metaphor of the body of God to describe the Earth as a living entity. Theologians like Jay McDaniel speak, as we do in this hermeneutical process, of the need to identify with planet Earth as a whole. In doing so he views the Earth as a total community of subjects 'like a forest whose 'spirit' is the sum total of each of its living beings.' (Hessel, 1996, p. 15). The interconnectedness of all living ecosystems amounts to a super-ecosystem, to the Earth as all-embracing organism.

Whether or not one opts for a particular understanding of the Earth as a living entity, our growing consciousness of the Earth as a subject and a 'thou', can no longer be dismissed. Those who have experienced the Earth in this way are committed to hearing the voices of the Earth, whether they be those of the various species inhabiting the Earth or the voice of the Earth itself. In this context it is valuable to recall how 'how nature has grown silent in our discourse, shifting from an animistic to a symbolic presence, from a voluble subject to a mute object' (Manes, 1996, 17).

This awareness of the Earth as a subject or community of subjects presents a formidable challenge to our traditional conceptions of the earth and the non-human components of the earth as objects, devoid of the consciousness, soul, mind and form of language that humans possess. This dualism extends to the belief that humans have genuine feelings, a spiritual consciousness and a capacity to worship—all of which are denied in other living creatures or inanimate parts of creation. Only humans, it was said, had the voice and language to praise God. Non-humans are dumb brutes.

The history of biblical interpretation has, by and large, tended to justify this dualism. When we approach a given text we may suspect that the language of the text gives rise to this kind of differentiation between 'voiced' humans and the presumed 'voiceless' members of the wider Earth community. Given this dualistic mindset, passages referring to 'the works' of God's creation blessing or praising God (as in Ps. 103.22), have been easily dismissed as poetic license. But do these texts reflect more than poetry? Do they reflect a common bond between humans and non-humans as worshippers before God?

We may, however, look afresh at the text and ask whether the voice of the earth and the members of the earth community can be heard in many passages in a way that views them as subjects with their own languages, non-human voices and

capacity for worship. Or we may ask whether the voice of the Earth has been suppressed because it is a threat to the authority of anthropocentric writers?

How then can we know the voice of the Earth? How can the voices of other species and entities on Earth be heard? We need not, a priori, assume that their mode of consciousness is the same as that of human beings or that their form of self-expression involves using a voice like ours. Ecosystems vibrant with healthy creatures possess a presence that testifies to the life energy and spirit within them. Conversely, a system broken by pollution and exploitation, testifies to the alien intervention of humans. Can their voice be heard in spite of their cursed condition?

Just as significant is the mediation of these non-human voices to our consciousness by sensitive humans. Ecologists like David Susuki, who claims to be in tune with the Earth, echo the cries of the denuded forests and the polluted seas in our hearing. Indigenous poets, like Mary Duroux hear the land crying and confront us with the pain of their mother, the crucified land.

My mother, my mother  
what have they done?  
Crucified you  
like the Only Son!  
Murder committed  
by mortal hand.  
I weep, my mother,  
my mother the land. (1992)

As we read the storytellers, prophets and poets of the Scriptures we ask whether they are mediating the voice of the Earth or members of the Earth community, or whether in fact they are suppressing those voices as they strive to hear the voice of God? Is Jeremiah, who hears the land mourning typical (Jer. 12.4, 11)? Is Job simply being rhetorical when he asserts, 'Ask the animals and they will teach you' (Job 12.7)? Or are most biblical writers happy to announce curses, brought about by humans, on the ground, trees, animal life or rivers without any sense of the anguish felt by the Earth? We are invited in this hermeneutical process to stand with the Earth to retrieve the silenced voices of the Earth. This is the task undertaken by Shirley Wurst in her analysis of the curse on the Earth (Gen. 3.14-19) in Volume 2 of this series.

#### **4. The Principle of Purpose**

*The universe, the Earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.*

The Earth is a complex of interacting ecosystems that function according to an in-built design or purpose. These mysterious patterns of balancing inter-dependent life forces are still being explored by scientists and philosophers, and evoking wonder in poets and prophets. Whether one views these patterns as being developed by an evolutionary impulse, an immanent energy, a living Spirit or a Creator God, the reality remains that all the pieces of these ecosystems form a design and reflect a

direction. The design is a magnificent green planet called Earth and the direction is to sustain life in all its biodiversity and beauty.

What is the future of this design, this complex pattern of ancient life cycles that still operate to keep planet Earth alive? Charles Birch in *Confronting the Future* and *On Purpose* demonstrates not only the wonder of this design but the tragedy of how modern human society has smashed ancient patterns, broken complex life cycles and thereby placed the future of the planet in jeopardy. As Birch reminds us,

The closing circle is the image or metaphor of the way nature deals with things. It closes the circle. It takes nutrients from the soil, turns them into something else and puts them back, so that it is a completely circular process....Traditional economists seem to think that the economy is a flow in a single direction between two infinities: infinite resources on one side and an infinite hole on the other side into which we can dump all our wastes. There is no account of recycling and reuse of wastes. Nature doesn't work that way. There is no pollution in nature's ecosystems. This is Garrett Hardin's 'law' of ecology, 'There is no away to throw to.' (Birch, 1993, 18)

This growing concern for understanding the design of Earth's life systems is motivated not only by those who now revere the Earth for its wondrous life patterns, but also by those who, out of self-interest, seek to create a 'sustainable society' in the future. Within much of traditional Western Christianity, we viewed the wonders of the Earth as but a foretaste of the glories to be experienced in heaven. We paid relatively little attention to whether natural resources or non-human life cycles were declining. After all, the Earth was disposable matter. The Earth would eventually be become waste, destroyed by God's grand incinerator.

This eschatological dualism emphasised heaven as eternal and glorious, an endless linear mode of existence, without the life cycles and ecosystems that are typical of earth. In the past, many have read the Bible from this dualistic perspective. Is this the orientation of biblical passages about the design, purpose and future of Earth? Is the idea that the destruction of the elements by fire in 2 Peter 3.10 the dominant orientation of the New Testament? When we view the text from the perspective of the Earth, however, is the death of Earth considered inevitable and, if so, is that death part of a natural cycle of birth, death and renewal? This question is tackled by Duncan Reid in his article on Revelation 21.

When we step back into the Hebrew Scriptures we need to ask afresh how the life cycles of Earth are understood? Is the grand 'design' that confronts Job anything like the pattern of ecosystems that we marvel at today? Is the purpose and direction of life on Earth to sustain the pattern of life established by God? Given the violation of life cycles by humanity-even in biblical history-do biblical texts tend to focus on a restoration of past life systems, or lean towards a liberation and transformation into a new system? In this connection, Brendan Byrne and Marie Turner explore the contribution of Rom. 8, when viewed from an ecojustice perspective.

## **5. The Principle of Custodianship**

*The Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners with, rather than rulers over, the Earth to sustain its balance and diversity.*

This principle is designed to reflect the role of human beings in the Earth community. Understandably, there is a widespread recognition today that the language of human dominion over the Earth is not acceptable but is, in fact, one of the factors that has led to the ecological crisis. A considerable mass of literature has arisen advocating the concept of humans exercising responsible stewardship over the Earth. According to this model, the *oikos* (household) of the Earth has been entrusted to humans by God, the owner of the house. The fact that humans have been unfaithful stewards in the past does not nullify the usefulness of the model.

I have critiqued this model elsewhere as one which retains an inherent anthropocentrism and a hierarchy of power that is based on an economic model of the ancient world (Habel, 1998). The *oikonomos* (steward) has responsibility for the planning and administrating (putting in order or *nomos*) the affairs of the household (*oikis*). Thus the steward is responsible for the *oikonomia*, the economy of the house (Hall, 1990, p. 41).

The anthropocentrism of the model is exposed by Clare Palmer when she writes,

...the perceptions of stewardship have great difficulty in accommodating the idea of God's action or presence in the world. God is understood to be an absentee landlord, who has put humanity in charge of his possessions... Within the framework of this model, God's actions and presence are largely mediated through humans. This is so both in the feudal perception, where God the Master leaves man (sic) in charge of his , and also in the financial perception, where God, the owner of financial resources, puts them in the trust of humanity, the investor, to use for him as best it can. (1992, p. 74)

Even more tempered understandings of stewardship, like that of William Dryness, retain the concept of 'ruling' as integral to the role:

Proper stewardship of the earth, the, is a matter of recovering the creative rule that God intended people to exercise toward the natural order. This is a rule that involves a proper husbanding (sic) of resources so that they will produce enough to care for the needs of all, and a respect for the order as accomplishing purposes that transcend even our understanding. (1990, 64)

Given the force of this model in the history of interpretation, we may suspect that biblical texts and their interpreters represent humans as stewards ruling on behalf of God, but nevertheless ruling. These readings reflect a dualism which reflects the traditional humanity/nature antagonism. Humans are creatures of a different order from the rest of creation and destined by God to rule over the Earth community for God.

An alternative ecological model views humans as a species which is an integral part of the Earth community, inevitably interconnected with other species and ecosystems, and dependent upon these systems for survival. Humans, therefore, have

a natural kinship with other living beings on Earth, a kinship that reaches beyond pure biological dependency (see Hefner quoted above). Many indigenous peoples testify to this sense of kinship in their culture. George Tinker describes a ritual among his people where the community is assembled in a circle.

In fact the circle is a key symbol for self-understanding, representing the whole universe and our part in it. We see ourselves as coequal participants in the circle, neither standing above nor below anything in God's creation. There is no hierarchy in our cultural context, even of species, because the circle has no beginning or ending. (1992, p. 147)

The indigenous tradition cited by Tinker is reminiscent of the indigenous traditions of Australia where kinship with the earth and with the community of the Earth is a fundamental understanding of reality. Through the appropriate rites at sacred sites, human custodians are responsible for sustaining a particular species of the natural world who will be close kin to members of their community. They are the custodians of the sacred, in tune with sacred presences in the Earth. Is the Earth ever considered sacred in the Scriptures? Are humans ever viewed custodians of a sacred Earth?

Our task is to ascertain whether the hierarchical stewardship model dominates the biblical tradition and its interpreters, or whether there are suppressed traditions where humans are kin with the rest creation. And more importantly, we need to ask whether the concept of humans being custodians of their kin and of the sacred Earth is reflected in any texts, or whether such a concept is suppressed as typical of the nature religions of Canaan. Are there texts which can be counter-read so that Earth affirming traditions within the text, perhaps from a Canaanite heritage, can be identified?

### **Principle of Resistance**

*The Earth and its components not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans, but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.*

This ecojustice principle is not as widely disseminated as the previous five, but is, in our opinion, integral to the process of ecojustice. In the struggle of social groups for justice, whether they be indigenous peoples, Dalits, women, people with disability or some other category, members of the group do not necessarily view themselves as helpless victims, but as oppressed human beings who find ways to survive and resist their oppressors. Victim construction by oppressors is itself part of the process of maintaining power over those being marginalised, exploited or depowered. Victims are even blamed for their condition as part of the conditioning process.

Those who belong to such groups and those who dare to identify with them and espouse their cause recognise that oppressed groups have numerous means of resistance to survive their lot. There are powerful resistance stories in the Scriptures including the account of the Gideonites who tricked Joshua (Jos. 9) and the record of the midwives who defied Pharaoh (Ex. 2.15-22). Are there explicit or oppressed resistance stories that relate to the Earth or non-human members of the Earth

community? Is the Earth constructed by anthropocentric writers into a passive victim? Or are there Earth voices in the text resisting victim construction?

We may well suspect that a given text is likely to focus on sins against God and wrongs against other humans, but ignore the injustices committed against the Earth, because the Earth is viewed as a passive object without feeling or voice. When God sends plagues or curses on the Earth, the earth seems to suffer because of human misdeeds. Is that just? Is that considered natural, or is there a hint that the Earth resists this injustice?

If we assume a posture of empathy with the wider Earth community, can we ignore the way the Earth seems to suffer unjustly because of what humans do? The curses of the covenant in texts like Deuteronomy 28 involve numerous domains of the Earth that have played no part in the human sin against God. When the sky turns to bronze and the earth to iron (Deut. 28.23) the people may indeed suffer. But does the Earth not suffer too? Is not this suffering unjust? Do these texts portray a deity who simply 'uses' the earth to punish humans (c/f. Amos 4.7-9)? Or is this a form of corporate suffering where the Earth suffers in sympathy with humans?

Suggestions that the Earth or Earth community are not insensitive to these injustices can be found in prophets like Jeremiah who hears the land mourning because Israel's sin has made the land desolate (Jer. 12.4, 7-11; c/f. Hos. 4.1-3). God too seems to suffer in sympathy with the land, a concern Terence Fretheim tackles in his article on Jeremiah 12 in this volume. Is the groaning of creation in Romans 8 also part the resistance of the earth to the injustices to which it has been subjected? Brendan Byrne's discussion of Romans 8.18-25 seeks to come to terms with this question. Is there more than poetic imagery in the assertion that the land will 'vomit out' those inhabitants who defile the land? (Lev. 18.24-30)

Biologists and ecologists have made us aware that the ecosystems of the Earth are not necessarily that fragile. They have a remarkable capacity to survive, regenerate and adapt to changing physical circumstances, in spite of human exploitation. Do any of the biblical traditions of hope reflect a similar awareness of the Earth as a subject with the power to revive and regenerate? There is a limit to this ecological healing. The earth is a finite body of ecosystems, resources and species. The time has come for ecosensitive humans to join the Earth in its struggle against these injustices that now threaten the total ecosystem of Earth. If we, as people who still find the Bible relevant, have been involved the ecological crisis, we have a moral obligation to help find a solution.

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## **4. Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics – Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics, Chapter One**

1.

In 2003 I published a detailed account of my personal role in the early development of what has come to be known as ecological hermeneutics (Habel, 2003). Since that time there have been three consultations on ecological hermeneutics at the annual meetings of the SBL in 2004, 5 and 6. As a result of these consultations, the hermeneutical process has been refined and given a more distinctive focus. In this introduction, I shall highlight the major components of this hermeneutic as they are currently being explored by biblical exegetes.

### **I. The Earth Bible Principles**

The current components of ecological hermeneutics explored at the recent SBL consultations are dependent on the ground-breaking work of the Earth Bible

team and the writers in the Earth Bible project (Habel, 2000a). The aims of the Earth Bible project were:

- to acknowledge, before reading the biblical text, that as Western interpreters we are heirs of a long anthropocentric, patriarchal and androcentric approach to reading the text that has devalued the Earth and that continues to influence the way we read the text;
- to declare, before reading the text, that we are members of a human community that has exploited, oppressed and endangered the existence of the Earth community;
- to become progressively more conscious that we are also members of the endangered Earth community in dialogue with ancient texts;
- to recognize Earth as a subject in the text with which we seek to relate empathetically rather than as a topic to be analysed rationally;
- to take up the cause of justice for Earth and to ascertain whether Earth and the Earth community are oppressed, silenced or liberated in the text;
- to develop techniques of reading the text to discern and retrieve alternative traditions where the voice of Earth and Earth community has been suppressed.

To guide writers in achieving these aims, a set of ecojustice principles were articulated (Habel, 2000b). These principles were developed over a number of years in dialogue with ecologists such as Charles Birch (1990). The principles articulated below were refined in consultations and workshops concerned with ecology in general, and ecological concerns linked to theology and the Bible more specifically.

**The principle of intrinsic worth:** the universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value.

**The principle of interconnectedness:** Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.

**The principle of voice:** Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.

**The principle of purpose:** the universe, Earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.

**The principle of mutual custodianship:** Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners with, rather than rulers over, Earth to sustain its balance and a diverse Earth community.

**The principle of resistance:** Earth and its components not only suffer from human injustices but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.

The writers of the Earth Bible Project explored a given biblical passage focusing on one or more of the ecojustice principles enunciated above. The five volumes in that series provided the basis for the development of an ecological hermeneutic for reading the Scriptures and tradition.

When reading the text, the interpreter in the Earth Bible project, taking into account one or more of the above principles, asked critical questions to ascertain

whether there is justice for Earth in the orientation, ideology or focus of the text or its interpreters. Typical questions are: Is Earth viewed merely as a resource for humans or as a subject with intrinsic worth? Is Earth treated as a subject with a 'voice' or as an object to be exploited?

These principles were not intended to be exhaustive or definitive. Ongoing dialogue with ecologists and those employing this approach lead to further refinements of the hermeneutical process, such as the three step model developed in connection with the SBL Consultation for Ecological Hermeneutics (2004-2006)

A valuable critique of this approach was given by Ernst Conradie at the 2004 Consultation on Ecological Hermeneutics This critique is based on a review of the Earth Bible in *Scriptura* 85. He concludes:

The Earth Bible's project's description of a set of six ecojustice principles offers an innovative and resolute articulation of such a heuristic key. Its strength is its critique of the anthropocentrism underlying the production and reception of biblical texts. Such a critique remains insufficient for an ecological hermeneutic though. (Conradie 2004, 135).

## **2. Ecological Hermeneutics**

After consideration of the various critiques of the Earth Bible principles, dialogue within the Earth Bible team and an analysis of so-called second level hermeneutical approaches, such as feminism and post-colonial hermeneutics, a more precise set of steps were developed for testing and exploration as part of a Consultation on Ecological Hermeneutics at the annual meetings of the SBL.

A revised ecological hermeneutic requires a radical re-orientation to the biblical text. The task before us not an exploration of what a given text may say *about* creation, *about* nature, or *about* Earth. In this context, Earth is not a topos or theme for analysis. We are not focusing on ecology *and* creation, or ecology *and* theology (Habel, 2000a). An ecological hermeneutic demands a radical change of posture in relation to Earth as a subject in the text. (Here the term Earth refers to the total ecosystem, the web of life, the domain of nature with which we are familiar, of which we are an integral part and in which we face the future).

A radical ecological approach to the text involves a basic hermeneutic of suspicion, identification and retrieval. This progression bears obvious similarities with several approaches of well-known feminist hermeneutics. The difference, of course, is that we are not reading from within the worldview of women, but first and foremost from within the orientation of an ecosystem called Earth. We are reading as creatures of Earth, members of the Earth community, in solidarity with Earth.

### **Suspicion**

First, we begin reading with the suspicion that the text is likely to be inherently anthropocentric and/or has traditionally been read from an anthropocentric perspective.

At the outset, anthropocentric needs to be distinguished from anthropogenic—a text originating from humans, and from anthropotopic—a text in which humans are a central topos or theme. This facet of the approach was the focus of several papers at the 2004 Consultation.

The anthropocentric bias that we are likely to find both in ourselves as readers and in the text we are reading has at least two faces. The first is the assumption or condition we have inherited as human beings, especially in the Western world, that we are beings of a totally different order than all other creatures in nature, or, in other words, in the hierarchy of things there is God, human beings and the rest.

A second face of this anthropocentric bias relates to nature as ‘object.’ We have for so long viewed nature and all its parts, both animate and inanimate, as the objects of many forms of human investigation, of which scientific analysis is but one. This process has not only reinforced a sense of human superiority over nature, but has also contributed to a sense of distance, separation and otherness. The rest of nature, especially the inanimate world, has been viewed as separate, other and a force to be harnessed.

This phase of the hermeneutical process is related to the principle of intrinsic worth articulated in the Earth Bible. When viewed with a traditional anthropocentric bias, other parts of nature are of less value. Often they are viewed merely as the stage or background for God’s relationship with humanity, rather than as valued subjects in their own right.

### **Identification**

The second element of a contemporary ecological hermeneutic is the task of empathy or identification.

In the light of my experience as an editor and writer in *The Earth Bible* project, it has become clear to me that the activity of identification, now deserves to be highlighted as a distinct step in the hermeneutical process. As human beings we identify, often unconsciously, with the various human characters in the biblical story, whether that be an empathetic or antipathetic identification. We can identify with the experiences of these characters, even if they are not necessarily ones we admire or emulate.

Even before reading the narrative or poetry of the text, a reader using this approach must—at least to some extent—come to terms with his/her deep ecological connections. Before we begin reading and seek to identify with Earth in the text we need to face the prior ecological reality of our kinship with Earth: that we are born of Earth, and that we are living expressions of the ecosystem that has emerged on this planet. This step relates to the fundamental principle of interconnectedness that we explored in the Earth Bible.

Identification with Earth and members of the Earth community raises our consciousness to the injustices against Earth as they are portrayed both at the hands of humans and God in the text. The exegete who pursues a radical ecological approach ultimately takes up the cause of the natural world seeking to expose the wrongs that

Earth has suffered, largely in silence, and to discern, where possible, the way Earth has resisted these wrongs.

### **Retrieval**

The third facet of this ecological hermeneutic is that of retrieval. The process of retrieval, it seems to me, has two basic characteristics, the one related to the prior process of suspicion and the other to the process of identification.

1) As the interpreter exposes the various anthropocentric dimensions of the text—the ways in which the human agenda and bias are sustained either by the reader or the implied author—the text may reveal a number of surprises about the non-human characters in the story. Earth or members of the Earth community may play a key role or be highly valued in the text, but because of the Western interpretative tradition we have inherited, that dimension of the text has been ignored or suppressed.

2) Where we meet non-human figures communicating in some way—mourning, praising or singing—we have tended in the past to dismiss these expressions as poetic license or symbolic language. Our anthropocentric bias leads to classifying these elements as mere anthropomorphisms.

Discerning Earth and members of the Earth community as subjects with a voice is a key part of the retrieval process. In some contexts their voice is evident but has been traditionally ignored by exegetes. In other contexts the voice of Earth is not explicit, but nevertheless present and powerful in a way. These subjects play roles in the text that are more than mere scenery or secondary images. Their voice needs to be heard, a voice that need not correspond to the language of words we commonly associate with the human voice.

Discerning this voice may even take the form of reconstructing the narrative—as a dimension of the interpretation process—in such a way as to hear Earth as the narrator of the story. Such a reconstruction is, of course, not the original text, but a reading as valid as the numerous readings of scholars over the centuries. In such a narrative, Earth becomes an interpreter.

### **Exemplar**

To illustrate the preceding steps of ecological hermeneutics I will outline briefly the key features of my presentation on Gen. 1.26-28 at the 2005 Consultation. A more detailed analysis of this passage is found in *Word and World Supplement Series 5*. (Habel, 2006)

#### ***Suspicion***

The suspicion that these verses are anthropocentric is immediately evident from the way that the status and role of humans are represented in the text. Human beings are given priority in relation to God, to other living creatures and to Earth itself.

Regardless of how the *imago dei* is interpreted, the implied author portrays the creation of human beings as a unique event. Unlike other creatures, humans are the result of a consultation between God and certain beings designated as 'us'. Unlike other creatures, humans are made 'in the image of God,' thereby setting them apart from other beings and giving them a distinctive and superior relationship with the deity. They are 'God-image creatures'. Unlike other creatures, the blessing given to human beings involves 'filling' creation with their presence and so giving them a privileged position. The relation of humans to God reflects an obvious anthropocentric bias.

A similar bias is evident when we consider how humans relate to other creatures and Earth itself. Humans are not one among many living creatures formed by God to share the planet, but that superior species who is given the mandate to 'rule' (*rada*) over all other living creatures. And, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, the verb for 'rule' in Hebrew involves the forceful exercise of power (Habel 2006, 39). For humans to claim the right to 'rule' like royalty further emphasises the anthropocentric bias.

The third dimension of this bias is reflected by the commission to 'subdue Earth'. The verb 'subdue' (*kabash*) is also a term that reflects the exercise of force. There is no suggestion of stewardship or care in this term. Joshua 'subdues' the Canaanites by extreme force (Jos. 18.1). And the presumption that humans are to subdue or conquer all of Earth is an arrogant anthropocentric attitude indeed.

### ***Identification***

If we now seek to identify with the characters in the narrative we gain a fresh appreciation this passage. In most traditional interpretations human readers have quite naturally identified with the human subjects because in so doing they are closely linked with a dimension of God and that, in a sense, enables them to 'play God.'

If, however, we recognise that in ecological terms all living creatures are inter-related and we dare to identify with our non-human kin in the narrative, we gain a very different perspective. We are then subjects, those 'ruled' over by humans. These non-human creatures emanate, in the earlier stages of the Genesis One narrative, for the land, the sea and the air. Their bond with Earth and the natural world is explicit. No so humans! They are not 'natural' creatures connected with Earth as a partner in the creation process, but beings of different order bearing the image of God.

When we identify with non-human creatures in the narrative, we become aware of the gulf between human and non-human creatures in this text and the assumption derived from this text that the human domination of non-human species is legitimate. From the perspective of our non-human kin, the consequences that follow from such a position are unjust and inconsistent with the ecological reality of our planet. As non-human kin we become aware that this text has been the basis for exploitation, oppression and abuse of nature by arrogant humans. And in spite of claims to the contrary, as non-human readers we can readily see how this text has provided justification for a history of human domination of our kind.

### ***Retrieval***

Is it possible to retrieve the perspective or voice of Earth in this passage? The text quite explicitly states that humans are given the mandate to 'subdue' Earth, an action which might quite naturally imply silencing or suppressing the voice of Earth and the Earth community.

It might well be assumed on the basis of this text alone that Earth is but a silent and insignificant object rather than a subject or central character in the narrative. Even a cursory reading of the preceding narrative in Genesis One reveals that Earth is a character who plays a lead role in the narrative (Habel, 2006, 38-39). Earth is first introduced as a figure waiting in the waters of the primal womb (v.2). On the third day, the primal waters part and Earth 'appears', a spectacular event I have elsewhere designated a 'geophany' (Habel, 2000e). Earth then becomes a partner with God in the creation process. Vegetation emerges from Earth. Fish emerge from the sea. And all animals except humans emerge from Earth. Earth is their mother. Earth is a character with a positive perspective.

In Genesis 1.26-28, however, that character seems to be suppressed and that perspective hidden from view. How might we retrieve the voice of Earth in the light of the wider Genesis One context and our current ecological awareness? I suggest the following is indicative of Earth's perspective.

*I am Earth. I was first revealed when God summoned the primal waters to part. I came forth from these waters as a living domain with potential to give birth. I count this a great honour and grounds for celebration. I am a valued part of the cosmos.*

*At the request of God I brought forth, like a mother, all the flora that covers the land. I gave birth to vegetation that has the capacity to reproduce. All the flora that comes from within me is inter-connected with me and is nurtured through me.*

*At the request of God I also brought forth, like a mother, the fauna that live on Earth. They are my offspring and depend on me for subsistence. All fauna depend on the vegetation I produce for their survival and enjoyment of life. I am Earth, the source of daily life for the flora and fauna that I have generated from within me.*

*Sad to say, there is another story that has invaded my world, the story of the so-called god-image creatures called humans. Instead of recognising that these god-image creatures are beings interdependent with Earth and other Earth creatures, this story claims that the god-image creatures belong to superior ruling class or species, thereby demeaning their non-human kin and diminishing their value. Instead of respecting me as their home and life source, the god-image creatures claim a mandate to crush me like an enemy or a slave.*

*My voice needs to be heard and the intrusive story about the humans in Gen. 1.26-28 named for what it is from my perspective: the charter of a group of power hungry humans.*

## Conclusion

Whether or not you hear the voice of Earth in precisely this way, the task of reading the text from an ecological perspective involves a) acknowledging the probable anthropocentric bias both within the text and traditional interpretations, b) identifying with Earth and the Earth community as kin who are subjects in the narrative and c) seeking to retrieve the perspective or voice of Earth and the Earth community of whom we humans are but one species.

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