

APPEALS TO THE BIBLE IN ECOTHEOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS:

A TYPOLOGY OF HERMENEUTICAL STANCES*

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Abstract

This article surveys and classifies the kinds of appeal to the Bible made in recent theological discussions of ecology and environmental ethics. These are, first, readings of ‘recovery’, followed by two types of readings of ‘resistance’. The first of these modes of resistance entails the exercise of suspicion against the text, a willingness to resist it given a commitment to a particular (ethical) reading perspective. The second, by contrast, entails a resistance to the contemporary ethical agenda, given a perceived commitment to the Bible. This initial typology, and the various reading strategies surveyed, are then subjected to criticism, as part of an attempt to begin to develop an ecological hermeneutic, a hermeneutic which operates between recovery and resistance with an approach that may be labelled ‘revision’, ‘reformation’, or ‘reconfiguration’.

Keywords: uses of the Bible, environmental ethics, ecological hermeneutics.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine and seek to classify the kinds of appeal to the Bible that are made in the context of theological/ethical discussions of ecology and the environment. The article thus serves in part as a survey of an important and expanding field, and, more significantly, as an attempt to probe critically the hermeneutical modes in which interpreters operate, with a view to articulating a cogent stance for a fruitful ecological hermeneutic.

A number of qualifications and caveats should be stressed at the outset. First, it should be noted that the classification we use below is, inevitably, an oversimplification. Like any typology, it simplifies in order to categorise, in the conviction that important differences of approach can thus be highlighted. Second, it should be signalled in advance that the stances represented in our initial typology are, in fact, problematised later in the paper, where a critical evaluation of the range of hermeneutical stances forms a basis for articulating a more cogent approach to developing what we call an ecological hermeneutic. Third, it should be stressed that, in many cases, the approaches we discuss below do *not* necessarily represent the way

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in which a given author *always* reads the biblical texts. Rather, the various stances represent different *reading strategies*; authors may consistently adopt one approach over others, or they may employ different strategies, depending, *inter alia*, on the text in question. Nonetheless, the classification is useful, we believe, in illuminating not only the different kinds of appeal to the Bible that are made, but also the different commitments that underpin these appeals.

Discussion of the impact of the Bible and the Christian tradition on contemporary environmental attitudes and practices has been hugely influenced by Lynn White Jr's now classic article, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis'.¹ White argued that the Christian worldview, rooted in the creation stories and the notion of humanity made in God's image, introduced a dualism between humanity and nature, and established the notion that it was God's will that humanity exploit nature to serve human interests. Thus Christianity, according to White, 'is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen' and bears 'a huge burden of guilt' for introducing the Western worldview that has essentially permitted and fostered our contemporary 'ecologic crisis'.²

White does not explicitly cite biblical texts, giving only an overview of the biblical creation story: discussing the making of humanity in God's image, he concludes that in the Christian tradition '[m]an shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature'.³ The rest of his arguments concentrate much more on the historic development of Christian thought and early science during his own period of specialism, the medieval era. Nonetheless, in seeking to refute White's claims, biblical scholars and theologians have often had to engage with problematic biblical texts, focussing not only on the Genesis description of humans as in the image and likeness of God, but also on their mandate to subdue and rule the earth (Gen. 1.26, 28). Indeed, as Ernst Conradie notes, many biblical contributions to ecological theology have been 'deliberately aimed at defending Christianity against the accusations of Lynn White'.⁴ The positive counterpart to this defensive response has been the effort on the part of various scholars to demonstrate 'that the Bible can

¹ *Science* 155 (1967), pp. 1203-7.

² White, 'Historical Roots', pp. 1205-6.

³ White, 'Historical Roots', p. 1205.

⁴ Ernst M. Conradie, 'Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project', *Scriptura* 85 (2004), pp. 123-35 at p. 126.

indeed offer profound ecological wisdom but that this has all too often remained hidden or implicit'.⁵ This represents our first category of uses of the Bible, one which, following Francis Watson, we shall term a strategy of 'recovery'.⁶

2. Readings of Recovery: rescuing the Bible from misinterpretation and recovering its ecological wisdom

Focusing on the Pauline reception of Genesis 1-3 and feminist readings of these texts, Watson outlines two modes of biblical interpretation, recovery and resistance. For each approach he points out an analogy between the reading strategy and a biblical myth. 'The Genesis myth corresponds to the revisionary reading that seeks to rescue the text from what is taken to be a history of misreading' – a reading of recovery.⁷ In other words, the pattern of the Genesis story is one of a pristine beginning, of a good and positive place, that is lost and obscured through the disobedience that follows its initial creation. Similarly, readings of recovery reflect a conviction that the biblical text is 'good', not itself the problem; the problems and distortions arise through the acts of later interpreters, who obscure and distort the positive meaning of the original. Such an approach is comparable with what Conradie, following Paul Santmire, describes as an 'apologetic' approach to the relation of the Christian tradition to environmental issues — biblical resources provide a positive basis for an environmental ethic.⁸ Put simply, the approach here is to argue that the biblical texts, rightly interpreted, can and do resonate with and support the reader's ethical perspective: positive resources to support their agendas can be derived from the text. The problems lie not so much in the texts themselves but in the traditions of their interpretation.

An ecotheological reading of recovery, often reacting specifically to the kind of charges Lynn White levels at Christianity, will thus be concerned to show, *inter alia*, that the biblical texts *can* be a significant resource for an ecological ethics: that they do *not* sanction an exploitative form of human dominion over the earth, *do* inculcate a sense of the goodness of the whole created order, and *do* convey a picture

⁵ Conradie, 'Towards', p. 126.

⁶ Francis Watson, 'Strategies of Recovery and Resistance: Hermeneutical Reflections on Genesis 1-3 and Its Pauline Reception', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (1992), pp. 79-103 at p. 82.

⁷ Watson, 'Strategies', p. 80.

⁸ Conradie, 'Towards', p. 124; H. Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn. The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) p. 7.

of redemption as encompassing ‘all things’ and not only human beings. Let us consider briefly a few specific examples.

First, there are treatments of Gen. 1.28 and its theme of human dominion which seek to redeem the text from being implicated in generating the attitudes and practices White criticizes so sharply. For example, in a major essay on ‘Human Authority in Creation’, Richard Bauckham argues that, in the pre-modern period, ‘the dominant theological tradition... did articulate a strongly anthropocentric view of the human dominion’ but that this was ‘largely as a result of imposing on the biblical texts understandings of the human relationship to nature that were of Greek, rather than biblical, origin’.⁹ In other words, the anthropocentrism was not an intrinsic feature of the text itself, but emerged only when it was (later) read through the lens of Greek philosophical presuppositions. Moreover, the medieval view, in which, according to Bauckham, ‘dominion was understood as a static fact, not a mandate for extension, and the world was understood as created ready and adapted to human use, not requiring large-scale technological modification’, differed crucially from the interpretation of human dominion that ‘accompanied the rise of the modern project of technological domination of nature... the medieval view was not itself sufficient to authorise that project’.¹⁰

It was only with the Renaissance, Bauckham concludes, and the separation of these anthropocentric ideas from their broader context in a theocentric worldview, that the notion of human dominion came to acquire a new significance.¹¹ This was further developed in Francis Bacon’s ‘vision of scientific progress... as the implementation of the God-given human dominion over nature, which Bacon himself presents as the meaning of Genesis 1.28’.¹² Dominion comes to be seen as a ‘historical task’,¹³ with humans charged to ‘play the role of God in relation to the world’.¹⁴ Thus, according to Bauckham, ‘[t]he attitudes that have led to the contemporary ecological crisis can be

⁹ In Richard J. Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), pp. 128-77 at p. 141.

¹⁰ Bauckham, *God*, p. 141.

¹¹ Bauckham, *God*, pp. 141-42.

¹² Bauckham, *God*, p. 159.

¹³ Bauckham, *God*, p. 160.

¹⁴ Bauckham, *God*, p. 167.

traced back to this source, *but no further*'.¹⁵ In essence, the claim here is that the problem lies not with the biblical text but only with the ways it was (mis)interpreted, first through the lens of essentially non-biblical Greek ideas and then much later in the context of Renaissance views of human possibilities and progress. Indeed, Bauckham suggests, biblical themes such as the placing of humanity *within* the community of creation, and the praise of God by all creation, offer the basis for a positive environmental ethic and a theological framework within which dominion can be much more positively interpreted.¹⁶

A further, highly influential, attempt to recover from such biblical texts as Genesis 1.28 a message compatible with, and of positive value to, the ecological agenda is the reinterpretation of the notion of human dominion through the lens of a model of stewardship. For very many readers, particularly those writing from an evangelical stance, the language of rule and dominion can be reliably read as a mandate for a stewardship model of humans' care of the Earth. Indeed, this model serves as a central plank in many attempts to construct a biblical environmental ethic.¹⁷ Yet not only are there questions to be raised about the ethical value of the model itself, it may also be questioned whether it is such a 'biblical' image as its proponents claim, particularly in terms of the relationship of humans to creation.¹⁸

As a second major example, there are attempts to show how the figure of Jesus in the NT can offer a positive ecological role-model. Probably the favourite Gospel

¹⁵ Bauckham, *God*, p. 158, our emphasis.

¹⁶ Bauckham, *God*, pp. 176-77; *idem*, 'Joining Creation's Praise of God', *Ecotheology* 7 (2002), pp. 45-59.

¹⁷ See, for example, William Dyrness, 'Stewardship of the Earth in the Old Testament', in Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (ed.) *Tending the Garden* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 50-65; Douglas John Hall, *The Steward. A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (Garden Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Friendship Press: New York, Revised edn, 1990). Stewardship is a prominent theme in Christian environmental declarations and initiatives, see e.g. 'An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation' (in R. J. Berry, (ed.) *The Care of Creation* [Leicester: IVP, 2000] pp. 17-22).

¹⁸ See especially Clare Palmer, 'Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics', in Ian Ball, Margaret Goodall, Clare Palmer and John Reader (eds) *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 67-86; Christopher Southgate, 'Stewardship and Its Competitors: A Spectrum of Relationships between Humans and the Non-Human Creation', in R.J. Berry (ed.), *Environmental Stewardship: A Primer* (London: T&T Clark, 2006) pp. 185-95; Bauckham, *God*, p.172.

texts for 'green' theologians are the well-known verses where Jesus refers to God's care for birds and flowers (Mt. 6.25-34//Lk. 12.22-31; cf. also Mt. 10.29). These are taken to indicate a harmony with and sensitivity towards non-human creation on the part of Jesus.¹⁹ Mention is often made of the extent to which Jesus' parables employ imagery of the natural world and agriculture.²⁰ Thus, Sean McDonagh writes that

A Christian theology of creation has much to learn from the attitude of respect which Jesus displayed towards the natural world... Jesus shows an intimacy and familiarity with a variety of God's creatures and the processes of nature. He is not driven by an urge to dominate and control the world of nature. Rather he displays an appreciative and contemplative attitude towards creation... The gospels tell us that nature played an important role in Jesus' life.²¹

He spent 'formative' time 'in the desert', 'regularly returned to the hills to pray' and 'regularly interspersed' his teaching 'with references to the lilies of the fields... the birds of the air... and the lair of foxes'.²²

McDonagh goes on, as do many others, to point to specific Pauline texts as indications of a New Testament vision in which all creation is caught up in the redeeming and reconciling work of God. The key texts here are Rom. 8.18-25, Col. 1.15-20, and Eph. 1.10, which together proclaim the cosmic scope of God's saving work in Christ.²³ Again, the anthropocentric bias of previous interpreters may well be exposed, as, for example, in interpretations of the Colossian hymn which, despite its

¹⁹ Tim Cooper, *Green Christianity. Caring for the Whole Creation* (London: Spire [Hodder & Stoughton], 1990) p. 218; James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) p. 143; Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 224-25; Edward P. Echlin, *The Cosmic Circle: Jesus and Ecology* (Blackrock: Columba, 2004) pp. 94-96.

²⁰ See Mt. 6:26-9, Mk. 4:1-20, 26-32, Jn. 15:1-8, and the comments in Sean McDonagh, *The Greening of the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990) p. 159 and Cooper, *Green Christianity* p. 172.

²¹ McDonagh, *Greening*, p. 158.

²² McDonagh, *Greening*, pp. 158-59. Cf. also *idem*, *Passion for the Earth* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994) p. 140; Echlin, *The Cosmic Circle* p. 95.

²³ See McDonagh, *Greening*, pp. 162-64 and, for example, Nash, *Loving Nature*, p. 125; Northcott, *Environment*, pp. 202-5.

apparently cosmic focus on *ta panta*, see its scope as (only) the church, or humanity in general.²⁴

These ecological readings of recovery, in their various ways, are concerned to show that the biblical texts do offer positive resources for a Christian environmental ethics, and that the regrettably anthropocentric and anti-ecological ideas that have fuelled or colluded with exploitation of the environment stem from a history of skewed interpretation, rather than from the texts themselves. Just as feminist writers have drawn attention to the androcentrism of commentators and translators, and have sought to recover the texts from such misreading, so ecotheological writers have begun to identify the extent to which anthropocentric presumptions have affected the interpretation of the Bible, and begun attempts to recover the texts' ecological potential.

3. Resistance type A: resisting the Bible in the interests of ecology.

Differing fundamentally from readings of recovery are what Watson labels readings of resistance. In this case, it is the Exodus myth, rather than the story of beginnings in Genesis, which for Watson illustrates the mode of interpretation: instead of seeking to return to a positive and valuable 'origin', masked beneath subsequent layers of distortion, here the original itself is seen as the locus and cause of oppression which must be exposed as such and resisted.²⁵ Here the approach is not one of rediscovering the positive value of texts hidden beneath a history of misinterpretation but of facing, resisting, and escaping intrinsically negative texts. Santmire uses the label 'reconstructionist' for this sort of approach to engaging the Christian tradition with environmental issues: the biblical and theological tradition is considered so problematic that 'a new edifice of thought must be built, from the ground up, with new foundations and new categories'.²⁶

Readings of resistance will, therefore, explicitly or implicitly side with Lynn White's critique of Christian anthropocentrism in their interpretation of specific biblical texts. Some conclude that a 'turning to the Earth, as the one true dwelling

²⁴ E.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984) p. 75; Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) pp. 60-61.

²⁵ Watson, 'Strategies', p. 81.

²⁶ Santmire, *Nature Reborn*, p. 6.

place for human beings and all other living beings, must free itself from the Christian tradition²⁷ while others are more focused in their critique of specific biblical passages. Certain texts are seen as culpable in terms of generating damaging forms of anthropocentrism, or views of the world as a resource for human exploitation, or as a material realm soon to pass away and thus expendable. From the perspective of commitment to certain ecological, or 'ecojustice', principles, such texts must therefore be resisted and opposed. As with comparably 'suspicious' feminist readings, this may be done in deliberate opposition to studies that claim that the texts are really eco-friendly.

Some examples of this kind of approach may be found in the five-volume Earth Bible series. Fundamental to the studies produced by the Earth Bible team is a set of six ecojustice principles:

1. *The principle of intrinsic worth*: The universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth / value;
2. *The principle of interconnectedness*: Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival;
3. *The principle of voice*: Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice;
4. *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.
5. *The principle of mutual custodianship*: Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners, rather than rulers, to sustain a balanced and diverse Earth community.
6. *The principle of resistance*: Earth and its components not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans, but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.²⁸

²⁷ T. Lemaire cited in Roger Burggraev, 'Responsibility for a "New Heaven and a New Earth"', *Concilium* (1991), pp. 107-18 at p. 116.

²⁸ Norman C. Habel, (ed.) *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2000) at p. 24. For a fuller explanation of these principles see The Earth Bible Team, 'Guiding Ecojustice Principles', in Habel (ed.), *Readings*, pp. 38-53.

In effect, these principles form an ethical standard against which the biblical texts are measured: the key task is to discern whether ‘the text is consistent, or in conflict, with whichever of the six ecojustice principles may be considered relevant’ in any particular case.²⁹ Where the texts cohere with the principles, they may be fruitfully and positively read; where they do not, exposing and resisting may be more appropriate interpretative strategies. For example, in investigating New Testament visions of the ‘End’, Keith Dyer candidly notes ‘a huge problem for ecotheology in those texts that resist retrieval and advocate our... “earnestly desiring” such an end’ (cf. 2 Pet. 3.12). The question for Dyer is to determine ‘[w]hich texts can be retrieved and which still resist’ any attempt at positive ecological reading.³⁰ The volumes of the Earth Bible series therefore contain examples of readings of recovery and of resistance, depending on the texts in view — and, of course, on the stance and perspective of the reader.

Howard Wallace, for example, is unconvinced by attempts to recover a positive reading of Gen. 1.28: ‘The roots of any modern ecological problems to which an emphasis on Gen. 1.28 and human domination of creation has contributed, would thus seem to be embedded in the biblical text itself and its own internal means of interpretation.’³¹ Keith Carley reads Psalm 8 as ‘an apology for human domination’, a text which does not take account of the interests of the Earth and thus does not conform to the ecojustice principles.³² The model of domination which the psalm presents and legitimates — ‘a classic expression’, Carley suggests, ‘of the dominating male ego’ — has been a cause of suffering for too long, and needs to be rejected.³³ Norman Habel, main editor of the series, and evidently concerned to confront the

²⁹ The Earth Bible Team, 'Ecojustice Hermeneutics: Reflections and Challenges', in Norman C. Habel and Vicky Balabanski (eds.) *The Earth Story in the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 1-14 at p. 2. For discussion of these principles, see The Earth Bible Team, 'Conversations with Gene Tucker and Other Writers', in Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst (eds.) *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 21-33.

³⁰ Keith D. Dyer, 'When Is the End Not the End? The Fate of Earth in Biblical Eschatology (Mark 13)', in Habel and Balabanski (eds.), *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, pp. 44-56 at pp. 48-49.

³¹ Howard N. Wallace, 'Rest for the Earth? Another Look at Genesis 2.1-3', in Habel and Wurst (eds.), *The Earth Story in Genesis*, pp. 49-59 at p. 56.

³² Keith Carley, 'Psalm 8: An Apology for Domination', in Habel (ed.), *Readings*, pp. 111-24 at p. 121.

³³ Carley, 'Psalm 8', p.122.

naïve assumption evident in many works on ecotheology ‘that the Bible is environmentally friendly’,³⁴ poses a series of questions about John 1 and its attitude to Earth.³⁵ For Habel, ‘the text of John 1 seems to devalue the domain of Earth — the material world below — over against heaven, the spiritual world above’.³⁶ Insofar as it does so, it does not reflect the ecojustice principles, and so must be subjected to ‘a hermeneutic of suspicion’.³⁷ Habel offers a similarly critical reading of Gen. 1.26-31, insisting that ‘[t]he verb *kabash* (“to subdue”) not only confirms the status of humans as having power over Earth; it also points to harsh control... The orientation of the human story (Gen. 1.26-28) is overtly hierarchical: humans are authorized to rule other creatures and to subdue Earth’.³⁸

In the Earth Bible project, then, we see first and foremost a clear commitment to ecojustice principles, worked out, we are told, ‘in dialogue with ecologists’ but deliberately not formulated using biblical or theological terms, so as ‘to facilitate dialogue with biologists, ecologists, other religious traditions... and scientists’.³⁹ The biblical texts are then read in the light of these principles, and found to warrant positive recovery or negative resistance according to whether and how they cohere with these principles. In ecological hermeneutics, as in other critical perspectives, such as feminist and liberationist interpretation, this stance of ethical resistance — a stance which exposes the problems and dangers of certain biblical texts — is well-established in scholarly circles. Less evident in academic scholarship, but worthy of attention for its popular impact, is a different kind of resistance to which we turn next.

4. Resistance type B: resisting the ecologists in the name of the Bible.

Exactly the opposite approach to that explored above is found in works which oppose the contemporary ethical agenda because of a conviction that it runs counter to the Bible. In these cases, it is the Bible — as interpreted, of course, by a particular

³⁴ Norman Habel, 'Introducing the Earth Bible', in Habel (ed.), *Readings*, pp. 25-37 at p. 30.

³⁵ Norman C. Habel, 'An Ecojustice Challenge: Is Earth Valued in John 1?' in Habel and Balabanski (eds.), *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, pp. 76-82.

³⁶ Habel, 'An Ecojustice Challenge', p. 82.

³⁷ Elizabeth Wainwright, 'Which Intertext? A Response to an Ecojustice Challenge: Is Earth Valued in John 1?' in Habel and Balabanski (eds), *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, pp. 83-88 at p. 83.

³⁸ Norman C. Habel, 'Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1', in Habel and Wurst (eds.) *The Earth Story in Genesis*, pp. 34-48 at pp. 46-47.

³⁹ Earth Bible Team, 'Guiding Ecojustice Principles', p. 38.

community of readers — that is perceived as the final and non-negotiable locus of authority. Such anti-environmentalist readings generally gain little attention in academic circles, where broadly liberal values and an approach informed by the tradition of biblical criticism tend to be dominant. But they warrant our attention because they are of considerable popular influence, especially, of course, in some evangelical and fundamentalist circles, notably in the USA.

There are some such arguments which explicitly oppose the ecological agenda, and others which do so less directly. Examples of the former include, from fundamentalist circles, the books of Constance Cumbey and Dave Hunt,⁴⁰ both of which view ‘any attempt at environmental stewardship — even any use of terms like “ecological” and “holistic” — as part of the [New Age] plot’.⁴¹ For Cumbey and Hunt, any Christian talk of global awareness is evidence of New Age influence, which is itself seen as a mask for a developing form of satanic tyranny.⁴² It should be noted, however, that, despite some sharp criticism of evangelical Christianity’s anti-ecological stance,⁴³ so far as we have been able to ascertain, there are few examples of either popular or academic writing which directly criticise the practice of environmental care. When environmentalism is attacked, it is usually because it is seen as one facet of a broader target of criticism, such as the New Age movement — a key focus for evangelical anxieties in the 1980s — or theological or political liberalism. More significant to assess, therefore, is the impact of doctrines, especially eschatological doctrines, which might indirectly shape environmental attitudes and practices.

Of particular significance in this respect are the connections between the views expressed by Cumbey, Hunt, and others, and the popular and highly influential readings of biblical eschatology found in dispensationalism (and other types of

⁴⁰ See Constance E. Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism* (Shreveport: Huntington House, 1983) pp. 162-169; *eadem*, *A Planned Deception: The Staging of a New Age "Messiah"* (East Detroit: Pointe Publishers, 1985), pp. 43, 110-23; Dave Hunt, *Peace Prosperity and the Coming Holocaust: The New Age Movement in Prophecy* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1983). Cf. the comments of Lawrence Osborn, *Guardians of Creation* (Leicester: Apollos, 1993) pp. 27-28.

⁴¹ Loren Wilkinson, 'New Age, New Consciousness, and the New Creation', in Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (ed.) *Tending the Garden* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 6-29 at p. 25.

⁴² Wilkinson, 'New Age', p. 24.

premillennialism).⁴⁴ This form of eschatological expectation has been popularised in enormously successful books such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late, Great Planet Earth* and more recently in the series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.⁴⁵ On this view, history is divided into various phases, or divine dispensations, and will culminate in a great tribulation, a battle between good and evil (Armageddon), and a millennial reign of Christ on the earth. Prior to the tribulation, however, Christians will be raptured from the earth. While this eschatology is probably not of major significance in British and continental European Christianity, its influence in the USA is greater.⁴⁶ It has a significant if indirect impact on the environmental agenda to the extent that it fosters a view of natural disasters and signs of earthly decay as indicators of the imminent end and as such to be welcomed. It also focuses Christian hope on the rescuing of the elect from a doomed earth, rather than (say) on the liberation and renewal of all creation.⁴⁷ Working to preserve the natural environment is not only pointless, it is working against God's purposes (and thus for Satan's), since the destruction of the physical elements of the cosmos must happen before the End.⁴⁸ Some sociological studies have indicated that such beliefs do indeed correlate with (anti)environmental attitudes and practices.⁴⁹

Remembering the caveats expressed at the beginning, we again have to beware of over-simplifications. In recent years, the perceived threat from the so-called New Age movement has somewhat dissipated and the urgency of the environmental crisis has reached the public consciousness to a greater degree, emptying something of the appeal from the arguments of Cumbey and Hunt and bringing a wider acceptance of

⁴³ David W. Orr, 'Armageddon Versus Extinction', *Conservation Biology* 19 (2005), pp. 290-92.

⁴⁴ Cf. Osborn, *Guardians* pp. 27, 61-62.

⁴⁵ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (London: Lakeland, British edn, 1971) and the series of books starting with Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1995). These books have sold in the tens of millions.

⁴⁶ See Crawford Gribben, 'Rapture Fictions and the Changing Evangelical Condition', *Literature and Theology* 18 (2004), pp. 77-94 at pp. 77-79.

⁴⁷ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992) pp. 331-37; cf. Osborn, *Guardians* pp. 61-63.

⁴⁸ For example, James McKeever, cited in Boyer, *When Time*, pp. 333-34.

⁴⁹ Douglas Lee Eckberg, and Jean T. Blocker, 'Christianity, Environmentalism, and the Theoretical Problem of Fundamentalism', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35 (1996), pp. 343-55.

the need for Christian responsibility toward non-human creation. Thus we find a self-described premillennialist such as Tony Campolo seeking to engender the Christian practice of care for creation, while at the same time avoiding the perceived dangers of nature-worship.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, other voices from the evangelical camp, while advocating Christian responsibility for the environment, remain wary of tendencies to downplay the primacy of humanity within creation. Calvin Beisner, for instance, comments that environmental devastation is often portrayed by the Bible as being caused by God, that the story of the withered fig tree might be construed as teaching us that ‘nature really should be expected to meet man’s needs’, and that wilderness is a negative image showing the effects of man no longer having dominion.⁵¹ This interpretation is accompanied by an optimism regarding human technological progress, ‘stemming from the application of the Christian worldview’, which Beisner sees as ‘a foretaste of the restoration of the cursed creation foretold by Paul and entailed by the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ.’⁵²

It would perhaps be easy, writing in Britain and in an academic context, to dismiss such views as those of a religious minority, whose form of biblical interpretation hardly warrants serious consideration. However, it is worth pausing to consider the possible impact of this perspective, via its influence on the evangelical Right, on US foreign and environmental policy.⁵³ It is disturbing to read, for example, how Hal Lindsey depicts both Communist and Arab countries as the key axes of satanic opposition to God’s righteous ones.⁵⁴ With the end of the ‘cold war’ that dominated the political terrain until the late 1980s, it is striking how the Islamic world has come into focus as the new and uncontested axis of evil.⁵⁵ More specifically on environmental matters, there is at least anecdotal evidence that expectation of an imminent parousia has, at times, shaped policy on the exploitation of natural

⁵⁰ Tony Campolo, *How to Rescue the Earth without Worshipping Nature: A Christian's Call to Save Creation* (Milton Keynes: Word, 1992) especially pp. 94-96.

⁵¹ E. Calvin Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) pp. 48-49, 53, 117-23.

⁵² Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness*, p. 25.

⁵³ See Michael S. Northcott, *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004).

⁵⁴ See Lindsey, *Late Great*, pp. 69, 72-80.

⁵⁵ Boyer, *When Time*, pp. 326-31.

resources: James Watt, Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of the Interior, ‘questioned at his confirmation hearing about preserving the environment for future generations, forthrightly replied, “I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns”.’⁵⁶

5. Preliminary comparison and critical assessment

While there are clearly all kinds of differences between the two types of ‘resistance’, one notable similarity is that, in certain respects, they *agree* on what certain biblical texts *say and mean*: the texts do teach creation’s subordination to humanity; they do not teach a responsibility to preserve the whole of creation. The basic disagreement concerns whether one should therefore resist the Bible, given a commitment to ecological values, or resist those (‘secular’, ‘liberal’) values, given a commitment to the authority of the Bible. To this extent at least, the differences have to do not so much with what the text is interpreted as saying, as with the contemporary stance and ethical commitments of the reader, and their conviction as to where the locus of authority lies — or, perhaps better, the way in which they construe biblical authority within a particular model of biblical hermeneutics. The three modes of biblical interpretation discussed so far may be visualised and compared in tabular form:⁵⁷

<i>Strong view of biblical authority</i>	Resistance Type B: commitment to biblical authority is taken to imply rejection of the ecological agenda	Recovery: the Bible, rightly read, supports the ‘green’ agenda
	(No strong motive to engage in biblical interpretation on this subject)	Resistance Type A: commitment to ecological principles requires critical resistance of (some) biblical texts

Strong commitment to ecological values

Naturally such a table simplifies crudely what is in reality a range of readings and reading strategies, just as the categories as a whole segregate the mixture of modes

⁵⁶ Boyer, *When Time*, p. 141.

⁵⁷ As might be surmised from our use of Watson’s scheme, a similar diagram could be drawn in respect of the interaction between feminist commitments and differing views of biblical authority.

and strategies in many ecological readings of the Bible.⁵⁸ But as with Weberian ideal-types, which never fully correspond with the more messy empirical realities, so these categories too can be valuable for analytical purposes, helping us to see what is going on in different types of reading. A reading of recovery, particularly if pursued consistently as an overall approach to the Bible, reflects a strong commitment to both biblical authority (construed in a certain way, of course) and to ecological values. The two types of resistance we have labelled A and B reflect a primary commitment to one axis: to the Bible, in the case of the fundamentalists; to the principles of ecojustice, in the case of the Earth Bible project.

There are, however, problems with each of the three strategies, the identification of which can help us articulate a more adequate hermeneutical model. Readings of recovery often involve strained and unconvincing attempts to show that a text supports and promotes the values for which the contemporary author is arguing. A number of the attempts to present an eco-friendly Jesus, for example, seem to result in rather unconvincing depictions of a Jesus made in the image of his contemporary interpreters. Moreover, readings of recovery (and other readings too) can fail to take adequate account of the extent to which the texts are, unavoidably and necessarily, open to a range of different, plausible readings. Competing readings of Gen 1.26-28, for example – mandate for human domination, or call to responsible stewardship? – are often presented as arguments about the ‘real’ meaning of the text. Richard Bauckham’s argument that the ideology of technocratic and aggressive human domination of nature can be traced back to the Renaissance ‘*and no further*’ is one sophisticated example of an attempt to show that the text itself does not mandate such a project. Yet the text in Gen 1.28, as with any other textual example, can sustain a variety of readings, readings which, of course, arise from and are shaped by changing historical circumstances and specific readerly locations. Indeed, what readings of recovery can all too easily present as a rediscovery of the ‘real’ meaning of the text, rescued from its pernicious ‘misinterpreters’, is in fact an argument for a *better* way of reading the text, an argument which takes its place in the competitive arena of various possible readings, which are themselves always developing in new and

⁵⁸ Habel, 'Introducing', p. 33, explicitly draws on Fiorenza’s feminist hermeneutic of suspicion *and* retrieval in articulating a hermeneutic for the Earth Bible project. Similarly, Conradie maintains that

changing contexts. What this redescription then implies, of course, is that we need to articulate (and argue about) the grounds on which we determine what constitutes ‘better’ and ‘worse’ readings.

Fundamentalist and evangelical readings of resistance (‘type B’) can likewise be criticised for cloaking a particular construal of the biblical message behind the claim to be presenting simply ‘what the Bible says’. The key difference here is that what the Bible says is not seen as eco-friendly, but the opposite. The stress in contemporary biblical studies on the diversity of theological and ideological perspectives represented in the biblical books runs directly (and deliberately?) against any such harmonising appeals to ‘the’ (singular) message of the Bible. But it does not require a very profound engagement with contemporary biblical studies to see how readings of resistance of the type we have surveyed involve both a very particular construal of the meaning of selected biblical texts and a prioritisation of certain texts which serve, in effect, as a canon within the canon — the rule which determines the reading of the rest. Nonetheless, what these readings do raise, resistant as they are to the contemporary liberal agenda in environmental ethics, is the issue of how Christians can avoid having their commitments determined by broader (‘secular’?) social trends and can retain a perspective from which to gain critical purchase on the world as it is.

The other type of resistance (‘type A’) faces a different kind of criticism. By making clear and explicit its contemporary ethical convictions, and measuring the biblical texts against these, it eschews any claim that the Bible as a whole supports these convictions, and opposes any naïve reading of recovery that promotes the Bible as an eco-friendly text. Yet by so clearly making a set of contemporary values the court of appeal, the canon, against which various biblical texts are tested, as in the Earth Bible’s ecojustice principles — where the principles are deliberately formulated so as not to show any connection with, or derivation from, the biblical and theological tradition — such an approach eschews any attempt to *show* how these values can emerge (or indeed have emerged) from a (particular) reading of the tradition, and thus, crucially, severely limits its ability to be *persuasive* for those within that tradition. To be potentially persuasive as an attempt to reshape Christian ethics, an

‘[a]n ecological hermeneutics... has to operate not only with a hermeneutic of trust but also one of suspicion’ (‘Towards’, p. 127).

ecological reading of the Bible would need to demonstrate that it offers an authentic appropriation of the Christian tradition. That claim, of course, begs a whole series of further questions, which cannot be fully addressed here. But we may at least begin to grapple with the issue of formulating an ecological hermeneutic by suggesting a further category which may prove a more fruitful and cogent way forward.

6. Revision, Reformation, Reconfiguration: towards an ecological hermeneutic

The crucial question, of course, is how to name and to explicate the kind of hermeneutic which is somehow positioned between recovery and resistance, which does not naively present itself as a recovery of ecological wisdom from the Bible ('Recovery'), nor distance itself from the Christian tradition through a prior and determinative commitment to ecojustice principles (Resistance Type A), nor distance itself from contemporary ethical challenges and the contribution of science to understanding those challenges through a reactionary claim to allegiance to the Bible (Resistance Type B). Paul Santmire's categories to label the various approaches to the relationship between ecological theology and the Christian tradition provide one way to begin to articulate such a hermeneutic. Having discussed 'reconstructionists' (those who reject the classical Christian tradition as offering no viable resources for ecological theology) and 'apologists' (those who defend the positive ecological implications of the tradition, rightly interpreted) — two categories which broadly correlate with 'Resistance (Type A)' and 'Recovery' respectively — Santmire describes a third approach in the construction of ecological theology which he labels that of the 'revisionists'.⁵⁹ These revisionists, among whom Santmire includes himself,

have worked mainly within the milieu of classical Christian thought... Since, moreover, the Old and New Testaments are the font of the classical theological tradition in the West, and since these scriptures are taken as the chief norm for all teachers and teachings (*norma normans*) by the tradition itself, the revisionists, as a matter of course, also have given the highest priority to biblical interpretation. At the same time, however, the dynamics of the classical tradition, thus understood, constantly call forth a *re-forming* of the tradition itself, as that term itself has historically suggested.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Santmire, *Nature Reborn*, pp. 6-9.

⁶⁰ Santmire, *Nature Reborn*, pp. 7-8.

One obvious advantage of this approach, whether we call it ‘revisionism’, ‘reformation’, or something else, is that it is actually a more honest denotation of what fundamentalist and evangelical readings, whether of recovery or of resistance, really are. As we mentioned above, any attempt to recover a ‘biblical perspective’, to promote a ‘biblical view’, involves not only the prioritising of certain texts over others but also the interpretation of those texts in the light of contemporary issues and concerns, a process which is ever ongoing. Indeed, one problem with readings of recovery of the sort surveyed above is that they tend to imply that one can leap from biblical exegesis to contemporary theology and ethics, reading, say, ecological values direct from Jesus’ attitude to birds and flowers, without doing justice either to the gap that separates the biblical texts from our own world and its concerns or to the work that therefore needs to be done in order for the ancient texts to contribute creatively to an adequate contemporary response. The claim to be promoting simply ‘what the Bible says’ is a pernicious one, which masks the agency of the interpreter; while the claim to be drawing on the tradition and re-forming it in the light of contemporary demands makes the contemporary reader’s agency visible and thus invites, rather than excludes, critical evaluation and contestation. The concept of ‘stewardship’, discussed above, is again a telling example. Rather than regarding it as a biblical image, or a biblical ‘basis’ for Christian environmentalism, it is more helpful to consider it, in Conradie’s terms, as a doctrinal or heuristic key (we would prefer the term ‘lens’).⁶¹ Just as, say, ‘justification by faith’ is the central doctrinal key in the Lutheran tradition, so, more recently, keys such as ‘liberation’ have become central to liberationist and feminist readings of the Bible. Stewardship, similarly, is a doctrinal key, albeit a less comprehensive one, which functions as a way to interpret the meaning of crucial texts such as Gen. 1.26-28. Such keys, Conradie suggests, ‘are not directly derived from either the Biblical texts or the contemporary world but are precisely the product of previous attempts to construct a relationship between text, tradition and context’. As such, they have a ‘double function... They provide a key to unlock the meaning of *both* the contemporary context *and* the Biblical texts and simultaneously enable the interpreter to establish a *link* between text and

⁶¹ Ernst Conradie, 'The Road Towards an Ecological Biblical and Theological Hermeneutics', *Scriptura* 93 (2006), pp. 305-14, at 305-308.

contemporary context'.⁶² Any key will, Conradie insists, inevitably 'distort' both text and context, perhaps ideologically — that is, in legitimating and concealing the interests of dominant social groups. Doctrinal keys should thus be subject to a hermeneutic of suspicion.⁶³ But precisely by identifying them as doctrinal or hermeneutical keys — rather than as simply what the text 'says' — this critical suspicion is invited.

Conradie proceeds to show how the six ecojustice principles of the Earth Bible Project function as doctrinal keys and could indeed be rearticulated as a 'small dogmatics'.⁶⁴ For example, '[t]he first two principles on the intrinsic worth (instead of the utilitarian value) of all matter and on interconnectedness form an incipient doctrine of creation. The emphasis on the earth community and a kinship between all creatures could also be read as a revised and more inclusive ecclesiology', and so on.⁶⁵ While Conradie is well aware of the possible objections to this reinterpretation of the principles — it would be 'a form of colonisation and conquest and would not recognise the resistance against doctrinal interference in biblical exegesis'⁶⁶ — there are clear strengths in his approach. Importantly, it provides a way by which one can see how the principles exhibit points of connection with, and in part emerge from (though by no means exclusively from), the biblical and Christian tradition, while at the same time functioning as a critical guide to the reading of that tradition.

Another benefit of this approach is that it prevents the contemporary ethical 'canon' seeming — as it did in the section on resistance (type A) above — to emerge without connection with the tradition it simultaneously serves to criticise, and to exercise authority over that tradition. Indeed, this approach enables us to describe readings of resistance ('against' the Bible) differently. They are not, despite their depiction as such by opponents, and except in the cases where the tradition as a whole is rejected, attempts to overthrow the tradition, to reject it *in toto*, nor even to subject it merely to 'assessment' against a contemporary ethical canon. What they are — or could be — are attempts to (re)read the tradition from a particular perspective; one which, *on theological and ethical grounds*, discerns where and how the word of 'good

⁶² Conradie, 'The Road', p. 306; italics original..

⁶³ Conradie, 'The Road', p. 308.

⁶⁴ Conradie, 'The Road', pp. 311-12.

⁶⁵ Conradie, 'The Road', p. 311.

⁶⁶ Conradie, 'The Road', p. 312.

news' is to be found. This is an approach with good historical pedigree, from Augustine's insistence that the only valid understanding of the scriptures is that which serves to build up the double love of God and neighbour,⁶⁷ to Luther's candid approach to discerning where scripture did, and did not, truly present the gospel of Christ, and so on.⁶⁸

It seems to us that a kind of acknowledged circularity is necessarily intrinsic to a fruitful hermeneutic: *doctrinal/ethical lenses are at one and the same time products of the tradition and the means for its critical rereading and reconfiguration*. Equally crucial, however, is the impact of the contemporary context in generating the particular priorities which shape the articulation of hermeneutical lenses. Again one could list all kinds of examples, from Luther's frustration with the system of mediaeval Catholicism, to liberation theology's emergence from the context of poverty and oppression in Latin America, or feminist theology's emergence amidst a radical social reassessment of patterns of relationship between men and women. In the current context, with a growing awareness of the magnitude of the ecological challenges facing us, a further reconfiguration of the tradition through a newly focused biblical hermeneutic is surely timely.

An initial requirement for an ecological hermeneutic would be that it articulates the particular doctrinal/ethical lenses that can enable a positive, creative, yet also critical re-reading of the tradition. Thus it can and must be a hermeneutic which practises both 'recovery' and 'resistance', or 'retrieval' and 'suspicion'. What its doctrinal/ethical lenses should be is a matter for another article, but we may at least briefly note the apparent potential in the biblical ideas that all creation is bound up in covenant to God (Gen. 9.1-17), in praise (Ps. 19, 148, etc.), and in the promise of redemption (Rom. 8.19-23; Col. 1.19-20).

⁶⁷ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.35.40: 'anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them'. (We are grateful to Dale Martin for alerting us to this text. See now Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006] pp. 11-12, 49-50, 168.) Cf. also 1.40.44. The move of placing love of God and of neighbour as the heart of the Law has earlier precedents, of course, both Jewish and Christian.

⁶⁸ On Luther's approach to interpreting scripture, see Roy A. Harrisville, and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand

At the same time, however, such a hermeneutic will not pretend that reading biblical texts can *suffice* for formulating a contemporary ethic, nor will it pretend that the doctrinal lenses emerge solely from the texts, nor even the tradition, alone. This latter is an important point, since it implies the conviction that an adequate ecological hermeneutic must be one forged in dialogue with (*inter alia*) scientific understandings of the world, just as feminist and liberationist hermeneutics use the tools of social-scientific and political analysis. Defending a model of the theological enterprise which requires dialogue with, and appreciation of, the findings of modern science, as opposed to polemical isolation from such claims, would take us far beyond the scope of this paper,⁶⁹ so this must remain an assertion, save for the brief observation that engagement with contemporaneous perspectives has always been the way the tradition has operated. But it would clearly exclude any readings (for example, certain fundamentalist readings which require commitment to a six-day creation or an imminent rapturist eschatology) which refused to accept the consensus of modern science on the areas under consideration — such as evolution, the effects of human activities on the biosphere, and the potential dangers to future human generations of current and predicted changes in climate — whether this refusal stemmed from religious or political commitment.

7. Conclusion

In this article we have sought to survey the different kinds of appeal to the Bible made in recent discussions of ecotheology and environmental ethics and to categorise them in a way which illuminates their approach to biblical texts. To label these approaches as modes of recovery or resistance can be helpful, we believe, in uncovering the stance adopted towards the Bible and towards contemporary ethical commitments, particularly since these kinds of orientations and motivations often remain implicit in scholarship. We have also sought to show how a form of revisionist hermeneutic is most cogent, at least for an approach which wishes to remain in positive contact with the Christian tradition, since it avoids the pitfalls of two unsustainable positions: on the one hand, claiming simply to be recovering or reproducing what the text really says, and on the other hand, opposing the text on the basis of a contemporary

Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) pp. 15-16; Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) pp. 231-36.

commitment, without showing how that ethical position can be fostered with the resources of text and tradition. The tasks that remain are, firstly, to articulate what kind of doctrinal/ethical lens(es) might emerge from a (re)reading of biblical texts in our contemporary situation and appropriately resource an ecological theology, and, secondly, to consider how such a theology might act as a springboard for proposals in environmental ethics.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ But see further Christopher Southgate (ed.), *God, Humanity and the Cosmos* (2nd edn; London: T&T Clark, 2005) especially Ch. 8.

⁷⁰ For examples, focused particularly on Rom. 8.19-23, see Christopher Southgate, 'Protological and Eschatological Vegetarianism', in Rachel Muers and David Grumett (eds), *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology* (New York & London: T&T Clark, 2008), pp. 247-65; *idem*, *The Groaning of Creation: Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008).