

Ecological Hermeneutics: Reflections on Methods and Prospects for the Future

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Biblical studies has always been shaped by, responsive to, and enmeshed in, issues and priorities in the contemporary context, even when it operates in a primarily historical or archaeological mode and does not acknowledge such contemporary influences on the questions and approaches it pursues. That enmeshment in contemporary agendas is no cause for regret; on the contrary, it is key to the relevance of biblical studies to ecclesial and public discussion, even if the discipline (like other academic fields) can thereby find itself lamentably implicated in legitimating pernicious ideologies and violently oppressive practices.¹

Among the range of contemporary ‘issues’ competing for our attention, that of the environment is increasingly recognised as among the most important. Indeed, the scale of the challenges posed on a global scale makes it scarcely adequate to list ‘the environment’, or ‘ecology’² as merely one among a list of issues. The impacts of a massive (and still growing) human population, using powerful industrial technologies to meet ever growing demands for consumption, in a context of huge inequalities of wealth, are of such enormity that ecological issues have increasingly come to the centre of political and ethical debate.³ Climate change is the most prominent and global of the challenges, but there are numerous others, closely interconnected in complex ways,

¹ An obvious example is the contribution of biblical studies to Nazi ideology in Germany, on which see, e.g. Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008). But more recent scholarship may also be implicated in contemporary political projects, in ways less often recognised. See James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Scholarly Projects for a New American Century* (London: Equinox, 2008); *idem*, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship and Ideology* (BibleWorld; London and Oakville, CA/Durham: Equinox/Acumen, 2012).

² Ecology is a preferable term in many ways, since it suggests the sense that we are talking about the communities of living things in which we find our home (*oikos*), rather than about things which happen to surround us (our *environs*). But I use both terms somewhat interchangeably here, without implying any clear distinction between them.

³ On these causes of the environmental crisis, see James B. Martin-Schramm and Robert L. Stivers, *Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Study Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 10-12.

including pollution, resource depletion, loss of species and habitats, energy and food supply, and so on.⁴

The need to respond to such challenges has been apparent for some decades, at least since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, often credited with initiating the modern environmental movement after its publication in 1962.⁵ Among theologians and biblical scholars, Joseph Sittler showed remarkable prescience in identifying in 1954 the need for a 'theology for earth', a theology which would rekindle a positive view of the earth as bound up in God's redemptive work.⁶ In a famous 1961 address to the World Council of Churches, calling for ecumenical unity, Sittler drew attention to the potential of the cosmic Christology of Colossians 1 to draw the whole of creation into the orbit of God's redemptive purposes.⁷

A much more critical perspective was taken in Lynn White Jr's now classic article from 1967, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', which blamed the Western Christian worldview and its creation stories in particular for introducing the ideological underpinnings that legitimated exploitation of the environment.⁸ White's article provoked biblical scholars to respond, in most cases by defending Genesis 1 against the charges

⁴ For an overview of what remain some of the key issues, see, e.g. Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (New Studies in Christian Ethics; Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 1-32; Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 39-66. For an accessible introduction to the subject of global warming, see Mark Maslin, *Global Warming: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2004). For the latest presentation of the evidence, see the publications available from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) at: <http://www.ipcc.ch/index.htm> (accessed 11 October 2013). The 'summary for policy makers' gives a concise overview of the scientific evidence.

⁵ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Penguin Classics; London and New York: Penguin, 2000 [1962]).

⁶ Joseph Sittler, "A Theology for Earth," in *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology and Ethics*, ed. Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2000 [1954]) 20-31.

⁷ Joseph Sittler, "Called to Unity," in *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology and Ethics*, ed. Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2000 [1962]) 38-50.

⁸ Lynn White, Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967) 1203-07.

implicitly laid against it by White.⁹ Indeed, much of the ecotheological and biblical scholarship produced since that time seeks to demonstrate (*inter alia*, and in various ways) that the Bible offers a positive impetus to care for creation. This is one major approach to ecological hermeneutics – though not one that generally uses this term – that I shall discuss in this essay, an approach I label one of ‘recovery’.¹⁰

A more critical and hermeneutically explicit approach to biblical texts has been developed in the Earth Bible Project, through the leadership of Norman Habel.¹¹ This is the second major approach I discuss in this essay. It is largely through the work of this project that something identified as ‘ecological hermeneutics’ has developed. Indeed, one ongoing and visible manifestation of the project is the ecological hermeneutics seminar held at the Annual Meetings of the Society for Biblical Literature, the main international (USA-based) organisation for biblical scholarship. A third approach to ecological hermeneutics, one that in a sense seeks to position itself between the two existing approaches, was developed in the Exeter project on ‘Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics’, which I directed from 2006-2009.¹² It would be misleading, however, to imply that there are three distinct or neatly definable approaches, when there is much overlap between, as well as diversity within, each broad area.

One indication that ecological hermeneutics is becoming established on the landscape of biblical studies is its inclusion in recent introductory or reference works, even if the label ‘ecological hermeneutics’ is by no means standard. For example, Paula

⁹ See, e.g. James Barr, “Man and Nature - the Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library, Manchester* 55 (1972) 9-32; Bernhard W. Anderson, “Creation and Ecology,” in *Creation in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia/London: Fortress/SPCK, 1984) 152-71; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Treasures Old and New: Essays in the Theology of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 36-43.

¹⁰ Drawing in particular on the terminology and analysis of 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* 45 (1992) 79-103.

¹¹ A somewhat dated overview of the Project is available at: <http://www.webofcreation.org/Earthbible/earthbible.html> (accessed 11 October 2013). Relevant publications will be mentioned below.

¹² For an overview of the project, see <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/theology/research/projects/uses/>. Relevant publications are detailed further below.

Gooder's *Searching for Meaning*, a work published in 2008 and intended to introduce students to the range of approaches in contemporary biblical studies, has an entry on 'ecological criticism', while the *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, published in 2011, includes an essay on 'ecological ethics'.¹³ Given such indications that ecological issues and perspectives are entering the mainstream of biblical studies it seems timely to reflect critically on the current methods and possible futures for this area of the discipline.

My aims in this article, then, are, first, to engage in critical reflection on the different approaches to biblical texts evident in recent literature, probing the hermeneutical stances which underlie different readings, in order, second, to offer some reflections and proposals concerning possible and desirable future developments. My approach will be to pursue the critical reflection through engagement with two fairly recent publications, Richard Bauckham's *Bible and Ecology* and Norman Habel's *An Inconvenient Text*.¹⁴ I choose these as examples on which to focus the discussion for several reasons: first, they are both good books (no easy targets for criticism!); second, each serves well as a summary of its author's much more extensive work on ecological interpretation of the Bible; and third, each book represents well what I see as a major approach in contemporary ecological hermeneutics. I also want to make explicit that my criticisms are expressed with great respect – *pace* rather than *contra*, as it were – and in the conviction that rigorous criticism is essential to the progress of any scholarly discipline.

A Reading of Re(dis)covery: Richard Bauckham's *Bible and Ecology*

The published version of Richard Bauckham's Sarum Lectures from 2006, *Bible and Ecology* serves as an excellent overview of Bauckham's ecological interpretation of a wide range of biblical texts, from Genesis to Revelation, drawing on more detailed essays

¹³ Paula Gooder (ed.), *Searching for Meaning: A Practical Guide to New Testament Interpretation* (Louisville, KY/London: Westminster John Knox/SPCK, 2008), 192-98; Joel B. Green, Jacqueline Lapsley, Rebekah Miles, and Allen Verhey (eds), *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 255-60.

¹⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London/Waco, TX: Darton, Longman & Todd/ Baylor University Press, 2010); Norman Habel, *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?* (Adelaide: ATF, 2009).

published elsewhere.¹⁵ In the opening chapter, Bauckham examines Genesis 1–2, assessing in particular criticisms of the stewardship model often derived from this text (Gen 1.26-28 in particular).¹⁶ Bauckham takes these criticisms seriously,¹⁷ but argues that the ‘limitations’ of the ‘stewardship model... consist more in what it does not say than in what it does’ (p. 2).¹⁸ The problems, in short, arise from the misinterpretation of the dominion motif and the failure to set Genesis 1–2 into the wider context of biblical theology. On the first point, and summarising arguments set out in detail elsewhere,¹⁹ Bauckham points to ‘Francis Bacon, in the seventeenth century’ as the one ‘who hijacked the Genesis text to authorise the project of scientific knowledge and technological exploitation whose excesses have given us the ecological crisis’ (p. 6). More fully, his analysis of the history of interpretation is that

the ideological roots of the modern Western project of aggressive domination of nature are to be found in a traditional interpretation of the human dominion over nature that drew on Greek rather than biblical sources and was subsequently, in

¹⁵ Many of these are now collected in Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011). Chapter 1 of this book, in turn, offers a concise overview of the arguments in *Bible and Ecology*.

¹⁶ Though it is something of an exaggeration to say that ‘the idea of stewardship depends for its biblical support on the same single scriptural locus as the talk of rule or dominion: Genesis 1:26 and 28’ (Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 11). Gen 2:15 is also among the significant texts, though it is certainly true that there are few biblical texts, especially in the Hebrew Bible, that make explicit use of the language of stewardship, and none that apply this directly to humanity’s responsibilities towards creation.

¹⁷ Indeed, elsewhere he is somewhat more critical of the concept: see, e.g. Richard Bauckham, “Stewardship and Relationship,” in *The Care of Creation*, ed. R. J. Berry (Leicester: IVP, 2000) 99-106; *idem*, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville, KY/London: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 172. For sharp criticisms of stewardship, see Clare Palmer, “Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics,” in Ian Ball, et al., *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology*, (London: SPCK, 1992), 69-86, and for an overview of the perspectives and alternatives, see Christopher Southgate, “Stewardship and Its Competitors: A Spectrum of Relationships between Humans and the Non-Human Creation,” in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2006) 185-95.

¹⁸ Page references in the main text in this section of the essay refer to Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*.

¹⁹ Bauckham, *God*, 128-77; repr in *Living*, ch 2.

the Renaissance, removed from its broader context in a Christian understanding of creation.²⁰

Indeed, the second interpretative failing Bauckham identifies is an isolation of Gen 1.26-28 from other parts of the Bible: ‘Interpretation of the [human] dominion [over creation] has gone wrong when Genesis 1:26 and 28 has been isolated as the only part of Scripture used to define the God-given relationship of humans to the rest of creation. We need to put it back into a much larger context of the rich resources of scriptural treatment of the human relationship to other creatures’ (p. 7; cf. pp. 32, 37). Put somewhat simply, Bauckham’s stance towards Genesis 1 is that it says essentially good and valuable things about the human relationship to creation, though these have been ‘hijacked’ and misconstrued in the history of interpretation and need to be set in the wider context of the Bible as a whole. In particular, Bauckham proposes, the book of Job counters modern humanity’s ‘hubris and excess’ (p. 37, cf. p. 51), ‘putting us in our place’ (the title of his book’s second chapter): the divine voice in the closing chapters of Job thunderously enunciates the diverse wonders of creation, which flourish under God’s care without any reference to their value for humans. A further aspect of this broader biblical picture, which counterbalances the position of dominion given in Genesis 1, is of what Bauckham calls the ‘community of creation’, an image most powerfully depicted in some of the Psalms (esp. Pss 104 and 148).²¹ Thus: ‘The distinctively human role of “dominion” is not something that sets us apart from the rest of creation, as though we were independent of it and external to it. It is a role that we should exercise within the community and precisely as members of the community relating to fellow members’ (p. 90). Bauckham’s exploration of the biblical depiction of this community of creation continues with a consideration of wilderness, and specifically an attempt to rescue the Bible from the accusation that it has a negative view of wilderness (cf. p. 103). On the contrary,

[a]ll that is “wrong” with the wild places is that they are not for humans, but the Hebrew Bible does not suppose that all parts of the world are for human use or

²⁰ Bauckham, *God*, 165,

²¹ See further Richard Bauckham, “Joining Creation’s Praise of God,” *Ecotheology* 7 (2002) 45-59, repr in *Living*, ch 7. On the theme of creation’s praise in the Psalms, see further Terence E. Fretheim, “Nature’s Praise of God in the Psalms,” *Ex Auditu* 3 (1987) 16-30.

habitation. Despite first impressions, the Bible seems closer than we might have thought to contemporary appreciation of wild nature precisely as non-humanised nature... in its unspoiled otherness (p. 114).

The culmination of Bauckham's study is the claim that the biblical 'meta-narrative' as a whole is a kind of 'eco-narrative', encompassing 'God, human beings, *and* the non-human creation' (p. 145). From the perspective of the whole Christian Bible, this is a christological eco-narrative, as Bauckham shows with a study of various New Testament texts, which also serves to encapsulate the key concerns and arguments of the whole book. Colossians 1.15-20, for example, 'offers a holistic vision of the whole creation integrated in Jesus Christ' (p. 157), while the Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Gospels envisages 'the renewal of all the creatures in their interrelationship and interdependence... an ecological renewal [that]... relates to the biblical writers' sense of the interconnectedness and interdependence of God's creatures' (p. 168). Finally, the closing chapters of the book of Revelation present an 'ecological eschatology', a 'living hope... for the healing and perfecting of human relationships with all other creatures' (p. 176). Despite the tendencies of the Christian tradition to regard creation as merely the stage on which the drama of human salvation takes place, and even as a realm from which to long for escape, 'none of this religious disparagement of the non-human creation', Bauckham insists, 'comes from Bible' (p. 145). The reason the Christian tradition has so often lost sight of the biblical picture is 'that it has been influenced by other current meta-narratives, other worldviews, other cultural perceptions, which in one way or another have downgraded the non-human creation' (pp. 147-48)... 'The modern dualism of nature and human history was read into the Bible' (p. 150).

In terms of hermeneutical stance, it should be clear how prominent – if seldom explicitly stated in these terms – is Bauckham's conviction that the Bible itself is not to blame for the attitudes that have informed and legitimated humanity's careless and selfish exploitation of the earth. These unfortunate attitudes have come, rather, from the distorting effect of other worldviews and ideologies, which have led to *misinterpretation* and misuse of the Bible. Although individual parts of the Bible, such as Gen 1.26-28, can lead to unbalanced and potentially damaging ideas, this is not because these texts themselves are not positively valuable and good in what they teach, but rather because

their perspective needs to be set in the context of wider biblical teaching. This broader biblical perspective can – in this instance – ensure the proper balance between a sense of human dominion and of human participation in the community of creation, between the vertical and the horizontal aspects of human relationships in creation.

With this stance towards the Bible, Bauckham's book exemplifies what may be labelled a reading of recovery. By this, I mean that it essentially represents the view that the biblical texts, once rescued from misinterpretation and traditions ignorant of, or inimical to, environmental concern, provide a consistently positive and valuable theological and ethical perspective on the environment and human responsibilities towards it. In short, a good ecotheological message is contained in the Bible as a whole, once the clouds of earlier (mis)interpretation are blown away. In a revealing passage reflecting on the process of biblical interpretation, Bauckham writes as follows:

Of course, biblical interpretation never takes place in a cultural vacuum, and often it is a cultural transition that makes it possible to recognise, with hindsight, the mistakes that previous interpreters made. The more holistic, integrated and ecological view of the world that has become available to us in recent decades... helps us to read the Bible differently. It becomes clear that the Bible's meta-narrative assumes that humans live in mutuality with the natural world... (p. 150).

It is interesting here that (certain) previous (non-ecological) readings of the Bible are regarded as 'mistakes', whereas present ecological interpretation, though made possible by a changed cultural context, is essentially just more correct ('It becomes clear...'). The 'rediscovery' in the book's subtitle is significant, indicating something that the book as a whole confirms: that Bauckham depicts his activity as one in which he recovers what seems to be the truly ecological message of the biblical texts from centuries of misinterpretation ('the Bible's metanarrative assumes...').

There are two main criticisms to be made of this kind of approach – an approach exemplified in Bauckham's work but much more widely evident. First, there is inadequate acknowledgement of the extent to which *both* older (non-ecological) interpretations, *and* contemporary ecological ones, are equally products of their cultural contexts and thus equally acts of constructive and creative interpretation. I would not thereby want to imply that all readings are on that basis *merely* cultural products, but nor

should we be deluded into thinking that a Renaissance or Early Modern reading, influenced by Enlightenment optimism about the potential achievements of human endeavour is necessarily less exegetically or historically correct than a twenty-first century reading influenced by contemporary ecological and climate science. What I think Bauckham fails on the whole explicitly to acknowledge (let alone discuss) is the extent to which the ecological reading of the Bible he presents is not only made possible by a contemporary ecological worldview but is also a *product* of that worldview, a construction made in the creative interplay between ancient text and contemporary perspective. There is no discussion of hermeneutical method, no reflection on what kind of interpretative activity is going on when we ‘rediscover’ ecological wisdom suitable for the twenty-first century in the texts of the Bible. This is an important point because it profoundly shapes a reader’s impression of what the Bible is and does: Bauckham presents his ecological reading as a rediscovery of what ‘the Bible’ (as a whole) really says, rather than a constructive interpretation of what the Bible can say when read (from a particular point of view) in the light of the contemporary ecological crisis. This conceals the extent to which a process of active and creative interpretation (shaped by a modern context and conceptualities) is at work and thereby too easily affirms the belief of many Christians (especially evangelicals) that the right answers are to be found, ‘rediscovered’, in the Bible – when read ‘correctly’ – rather than constructed in a process of interpretation in which the texts are always open to various construals and therefore always contestable as to their meaning.²² Indeed, the biblical meta-narrative can be, and is, read very differently in terms of its environmental and ethical implications by interpreters with different political and ethical convictions.²³

²² I make broadly the same criticism of *The Green Bible*: see David G. Horrell, “*The Green Bible*: A Timely Idea Deeply Flawed,” *Expository Times* 121 (2010) 180-86.

²³ See, for example, E. Calvin Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty/Eerdmans, 1997), who disputes much of the evidence used to suggest that there is an environmental crisis, including that concerning the impact of global warming (pp. 65-66, 164, 170), argues that humanity’s God-given task is to turn the earth from wilderness into garden, increasing its bounty and productivity, and favours unfettered economic development as the best means by which developing (as well as developed) countries

A second, though closely related, criticism concerns the impression Bauckham conveys – or at least, does not explicitly contradict (nor discuss) – that this positive judgment applies to the Bible as a whole; no texts are identified as intrinsically problematic or stubbornly inimical to the ecological agenda. Implicitly at least, biblical texts – rightly interpreted – consistently offer a positive contribution to the ecological meta-narrative. Phillip Sherman is therefore precisely correct (if slightly careless), it seems to me, when he comments in a review of another of Bauckham’s recent books:

Although he nowhere says so explicitly... I was left with the impressive [*sic*] that Bauckham would contend that biblical texts *properly understood and appropriated* would only be beneficial to our current ecological crisis and rarely or never problematic. When biblical texts have been harmful for the environmental cause, it is because of “ideological co-optation ... for alien ends”.²⁴ Potentially ‘difficult’ texts are dealt with, in some cases (Gen 1.26-28), through an attempt to show that the text is not culpable for creating damaging attitudes in the way some critics have claimed. In other cases – notably 2 Pet 3.10-13 – difficult texts are simply left out of the picture.²⁵ This passage in 2 Peter is perhaps the most challenging example of an eschatological text that raises severe difficulties for a green reading due to its apparent portrayal of a process in which the old earth will be replaced by a new one.²⁶ Indeed, 2 Pet 3.10-13 raises particular problems with its insistence that Christians should ‘hasten’ this time (v. 12). The most prominent way of attempting to retrieve a ‘green’ reading of such eschatological texts, particularly in broadly ‘green evangelical’ treatments, is to insist that they depict not the destruction of the earth and its replacement,

can increase their wealth and improve their environments. And he does not see any need for those in the richest countries like the USA to reduce their levels of consumption.

²⁴ Phillip Sherman, ‘Review of Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*’, *Review of Biblical Literature* 2013 [<http://www.bookreviews.org>] (accessed 11 October 2013).

²⁵ It is mentioned only in a footnote (p. 203 n. 51). Bauckham has, however, treated this text in great detail in a major commentary: see Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 50 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 303-35.

²⁶ Note, e.g. Bauckham’s comment on this passage: ‘The present world in which evil is all too dominant is coming to an end and will be replaced by a world in which righteousness is at home’ (*Jude, 2 Peter*, 334).

but rather its transformation.²⁷ In other words, as with the creation stories in Genesis 1–2, the eschatological texts of the Bible are rescued from the criticism that they inculcate environmentally negative attitudes, through exegetical labour intended to show that this is a misinterpretation and that they actually engender (or at least do not contradict) a positive perspective on the environment. But it is open to serious question whether such ‘difficult’ texts can be adequately dealt with in such an apologetic way.²⁸

It is also important to observe that both these issues would seem to be reflections of a particular model of the character and authority of the Bible, one in which its consistency and sufficiency are in some sense presumed. Indeed, if one holds a strongly evangelical view of the Bible’s status, consistency, and authority, and also holds the view that environmentalism is a cause to be embraced, then one *has* to attempt just such a demonstration – that the Bible as a whole consistently and coherently supports that

²⁷ See, e.g. Douglas J. Moo, “Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49 (2006) 449-88; Thomas Finger, *Evangelicals, Eschatology, and the Environment* (The Scholars Circle; Wynnewood, PA: Evangelical Environmental Network, 1998). A rather different – and potentially very valuable – perspective is argued by Stephen N. Williams, *The Limits of Hope and the Logic of Love: Essays on Eschatology and Social Action* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2006). In the context of evangelical arguments about annihilation versus continuation, Williams argues for a duty of love and care whether or not there is any belief in future transformation. In short, care for the environment, Williams proposes, is a duty of love not a matter of hope.

²⁸ See further Keith D. Dyer, “When Is the End Not the End? The Fate of Earth in Biblical Eschatology (Mark 13),” in *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Vicky Balabanski, *The Earth Bible* (London and New York/Cleveland, OH: Sheffield Academic Press/Pilgrim Press, 2002) 44-56; Edward Adams, *The Stars Will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and Its World*, Library of New Testament Studies 347 (London: T&T Clark, 2007); *idem*, “Retrieving the Earth from the Conflagration: 2 Peter 3.5-13 and the Environment,” in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. David G. Horrell, et al. (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2010) 108-20; *idem*, ‘Does Awaiting “New Heavens and a New Earth” (2 Peter 3:13) Mean Abandoning the Environment?’, *Expository Times* 121 (2010), 168-75; Barbara R. Rossing, “‘Hastening the Day’ When the Earth Will Burn? Global Warming, Revelation and 2 Peter 3 (Advent 2, Year B)’, *Currents in Theology and Mission* 35 (2008), 363-373.

ethical commitment; otherwise one or other view has to change.²⁹ These convictions as to the Bible's status and authority may or may not be what Bauckham intends to reflect in his work, but *Bible and Ecology* does not challenge, and indeed encourages, just such a view. And, in summary, the two problems with such an approach are that it inadequately acknowledges (still less theorizes) the extent to which such 'reading' of the Bible (a) is an unavoidably constructive and creative activity and (b) requires a critical as well as appreciative stance towards the text.

A Critical Reading of Suspicion, Identification, and Retrieval: Norman Habel's *An Inconvenient Text*

Even more than Bauckham's *Bible and Ecology*, Habel's *An Inconvenient Text* is an accessible publication intended for a wide readership. At the same time it draws upon, summarises, and develops further Habel's extensive work on ecological interpretation of the Bible. This work has been collaborative, in particular through the Earth Bible Project, initiated at a symposium on Ecology and Religion held in Adelaide in 1996.³⁰ Apart from the perceived urgency of the ecological crisis, an important motivation for the project was the sense that much previous work had tended simply to cherry-pick selected biblical texts, or apologetically to depict the Bible as an 'eco-friendly' book, and lacked critical hermeneutical reflection.³¹ By contrast, the Earth Bible Project approaches the biblical texts with critical suspicion – that the texts may be anthropocentric, potentially unfriendly towards Earth, and so on – before attempting any positive retrieval. Perhaps the most distinctive and innovative aspect of the Project is the focus for this retrieval on the voice of Earth: it is this voice, whether explicit or implicit in the text, or indeed

²⁹ On the correlation between perspectives on biblical authority and on environmental commitment, see David G. Horrell, Cheryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21 (2008), 231-33.

³⁰ See Norman C. Habel, 'The Earth Bible Project', *SBL Forum* (July 2004), at <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=291> (accessed 11 Sept 2013).

³¹ Cf. Norman Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible," in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel, The Earth Bible 1 (Sheffield/Cleveland, OH: Sheffield Academic Press/ Pilgrim Press, 2000), 30.

constructed imaginatively by the interpreter, which the Project seeks to bring to expression. Five edited volumes of essays in the Earth Bible series (published between 2000-2002) have since been followed by another volume of essays and an ongoing series of Earth Bible commentaries.³²

Fundamental to the work of the Earth Bible Project is a set of ecojustice principles, developed in conversation with scientists and ecologists, and deliberately formulated in non-theological language, so as to facilitate dialogue across disciplines and traditions.³³ These are as follows:

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.

³² The five initial volumes in the Earth Bible series are: Norman C. Habel, ed. *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, The Earth Bible 1 (Sheffield/Cleveland, OH: Sheffield Academic Press/ Pilgrim Press, 2000); Norman C. Habel and S. Wurst, eds, *The Earth Story in Genesis*, The Earth Bible 2 (Sheffield/Cleveland, OH: Sheffield Academic Press/ Pilgrim Press, 2000); Norman C. Habel and S. Wurst, eds, *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*, The Earth Bible 3 (Sheffield/Cleveland, OH: Sheffield Academic Press/ Pilgrim Press, 2001); Norman C. Habel, ed. *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, The Earth Bible 4 (Sheffield/Cleveland, OH: Sheffield Academic Press/ Pilgrim Press, 2001); Norman C. Habel and Vicky Balabanski, eds, *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, The Earth Bible 5 (London and New York/Cleveland, OH: Sheffield Academic Press/Pilgrim Press, 2002). A subsequent volume emerged from the SBL Ecological Hermeneutics seminar: Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, eds, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, SBL Symposium Series 46 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008). The Earth Bible Commentary series has been inaugurated by Norman Habel, *The Birth, the Curse and the Greening of Earth: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1-11*, The Earth Bible Commentary, 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011).

³³ See The Earth Bible Team, "Guiding Ecojustice Principles," in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, 38.

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.³⁴

These principles serve both to encapsulate explicitly the ecological values and commitments of the Team and also to provide a basis for critical engagement with biblical texts. The exegetical and interpretative 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.³⁵

In direct contrast to the approach of recovery, as exemplified in Bauckham’s book, Habel’s approach, as indicated by the prominence of suspicion, begins with a forthright acknowledgment that the Bible is an ‘inconvenient’, ambivalent, and sometimes damaging text that ‘has been used to justify our domination, devaluation and destruction of the planet’ (p. xvii).³⁶ Moreover, this negative damage is not attributed only to misinterpretation and misuse of the Bible. On the contrary, it is seen as inherent in some of the texts. In *An Inconvenient Text* Habel makes this point clear and explicit by talking of ‘grey’ texts and ‘green’ texts. Gen 1.26-28, for example, ‘is a grey text—a text that is ecologically destructive, devaluing Earth and offering humans a God-given right to harness nature’ (p. 2; cf. pp. 46-47).³⁷ In the opening chapters of his book, Habel shows why he finds Gen 1.26-28, along with Ps 8, texts from narratives about the Flood and the conquest of the Land, to be grey texts. Habel seeks to expose the ecologically damaging aspects of their depictions of the way God relates to humans and the land, highlighting,

³⁴ Habel, “The Earth Bible Project,” (n.p.). The Ecojustice Principles are printed in each of the volumes of the Earth Bible series and also in Habel, *The Birth*, 2. Note in particular the discussions of methodology in Earth Bible Team, “Guiding Ecojustice Principles”; “Conversations with Gene Tucker and Other Writers,” in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, 21-33; “Ecojustice Hermeneutics: Reflections and Challenges,” in *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, 1-14.

³⁵ Earth Bible Team, “Ecojustice Hermeneutics”, 2.

³⁶ Page references in the text in this section of the essay refer to Habel, *Inconvenient Text*.

³⁷ See also Norman C. Habel, “Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1,” in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, 34-48; Habel, *The Birth*, 35-40.

for example, God's destruction of nature in the stories of Flood and Exodus. Thus, for example: 'The exodus event may well be a symbol of liberation of oppressed peoples; it is not, however, a symbol or expression of liberation for Earth or Earth's ecosystems. The texts reporting the plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea reveal these mighty acts of God as destructive deeds against innocent domains of nature' (p. 20).

Habel is not content, of course, only to highlight the dangerous and negative features of the grey texts. The pressing ecological challenges of the present require us to 'green' our ways of thinking and to 'read the Bible in a radically new way' (p. 48, cf. p. 39). Hence Habel moves on to discuss the possibilities for 'a green reading of grey texts' (p. 51). This does not mean, however – and again in contrast to the kind of reading of recovery exemplified by Bauckham – that grey texts can be interpreted in such a way as to show that they are, or can be, green: 'conflicting texts should not be harmonized... Grey texts are not green!' (p. 54, cf. pp. 63-64). Rather, a 'green' reading, for Habel, entails a particular hermeneutical process. Developing the approach practised in the initial volumes of the Earth Bible Project, Habel articulates a three-step process involving suspicion, identification and retrieval (pp. 56-60).³⁸

The first step requires the exercise of suspicion: that past interpretations and indeed the texts themselves may 'focus on human interests rather than those of Earth or Earth community'. In doing this, 'we expose grey texts for what they are: texts that reflect an anthropocentric view of the natural world' (p. 57). The second step is 'to identify with Earth, the domain of Earth or with members of the Earth community, and then to read the text from that perspective'. This enables us 'to hear the voices of Earth in the Bible, whether they are explicit, or suppressed by the bias of the dominant anthropocentric context' (p. 58). These two steps make the third and final step possible, namely a retrieval of the voice of Earth: 'the task', quite simply, 'is to retrieve that voice' (p. 59).

A 'green' reading of 'the mandate to dominate', then, does not involve a retrieval of the motif of dominion, for example under the softer label of stewardship. On the contrary, it entails highlighting the positive depiction of Earth in Gen 1.1-25, and

³⁸ See also Norman C. Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 3-5; Habel, *The Birth*, 8-14.

showing how ‘Gen 1:26-28 comes as a horrible intrusion in the plot of the narrative’ (p. 67; cf. p. 72).³⁹ Furthermore, it entails an identification with Earth that enables an imaginative construction of Earth’s voice (pp. 70-71). There remains an unavoidable tension, opposition even, between green texts that value and give voice to Earth, and grey texts that suppress or devalue Earth. Choosing between grey and green texts, or specifically between domination and service, is then legitimated by an appeal to the way of Jesus: ‘To follow the way of Christ is to choose the green rather than the grey texts as guides for life... the grey texts of the Old Testament are superseded and are no longer valid as expressions of our faith in Christ’ (p. 77; cf. pp. 118-19). Likewise, while ‘green’ (and ‘grey’) texts are found in both Old and New Testaments, Habel suggests in particular that ‘[t]he green texts of Romans 8 and Colossians 1... offer guidelines for reflecting on other texts... [They] provide principles necessary to guide our reading of all promised land texts or traditions, and move us to hear the cries of a groaning creation’ (p. 114). Ultimately, and again in clear contrast to Bauckham, Habel is candid and forceful about the necessity to *choose* green texts over grey texts (p. 118) and thus to reject the influence of texts that devalue or denigrate nature. Instead, the green texts provide the basis for a message of ‘good news for the whole of creation’ (p. 122).

As will be apparent from the juxtaposition, Habel’s approach precisely avoids the criticisms I made of Bauckham’s: a critical and constructive hermeneutical process is made clear; and there is an explicit rejection of the idea that the Bible *as a whole* can be ‘green’ and eco-friendly. Indeed, the prominence given to a step of suspicion in Habel’s hermeneutic suggests a different model of biblical authority underlying his approach, one that is much more ready to be critical as well as appreciative, to reject as well as reclaim biblical texts and to acknowledge that a constructive and imaginative process is at work in ecological interpretation. This does not necessarily imply any rejection of the canonical status of the (whole) Bible, but rather a different view of what canonical authority means, and of the kind of critical engagement that can be appropriate in discerning the word of God within the Bible. It is interesting to note, however, that some of the contributors to the Earth Bible volumes would seem to reflect a difference stance, in practice avoiding any suspicion of the Bible itself and exercising suspicion only

³⁹ Also Habel, “Geophany”.

against its interpreters, and to that extent representing an approach closer to that of Bauckham than to Habel.⁴⁰ As will already be clear, I regard a willingness to be critical of the texts themselves as vital.

Somewhat different criticisms may therefore be made of Habel's approach, and of the Earth Bible Project more generally. I begin with the function of the ecojustice principles. They are set out at the opening of each volume in the Earth Bible series, representing their function as an encapsulation of the ecological values and commitments of the Project. Although contributors to the Earth Bible series describe and use the principles in different ways, their non-theological formulation and *a priori* role in the process of interpretation invites criticism from a theological hermeneutical perspective.

First, the use of non-theological and widely acceptable language is reminiscent of a certain approach to inter-religious dialogue, one that seeks to express some shared points of commonality in generic language that is not specific to any one religious tradition.⁴¹ To speak of 'Earth' rather than 'creation' is the most obvious example, to which I return briefly at a later point in this essay. The problem with such an approach is that it thereby fails to speak faithfully in the language of the Christian tradition (and *mutatis mutandis*, any other religious tradition too), and cannot therefore have integrity as an authentic representation of that tradition, ceding this instead to some liberal and supposedly neutral terminology, which, as Stanley Hauerwas has remarked, masquerades as neutral, as if it had no particular narrative about what it is to be human in the world but

⁴⁰ Cf, e.g, Hilary Marlow, "The Other Prophet! The Voice of Earth in the Book of Amos," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 75-83 – note her comment on exercising "a different form of suspicion... not at the biblical text" (p. 75); Susan Miller, "The Descent of Darkness over the Land: Listening to the Voice of Earth in Mark 15:33," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 123-30, who exercises suspicion about "biblical interpretation" (p. 129). This is also broadly true of Hilary Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics: Re-Reading Amos, Hosea and First Isaiah* (Oxford: OUP, 2009). However, unlike Bauckham's book, there is here considerable discussion of the hermeneutical issues involved in bringing biblical texts to bear on contemporary environmental issues which are outside the consciousness and concern of the biblical writers.

⁴¹ E.g, in John Hick's discussion of 'the Real': John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke & London: Macmillian, 1989).

in so doing imposes its own story about human identity and relationship to the earth.⁴² Preferable is an approach in which participants in dialogue retain the language and perspective of their own tradition, while seeking mutual understanding and common ground with others. More specifically, however, the Earth Bible's ecojustice principles *do* look reminiscent of a particular kind of 'tradition' or perspective, to which various writers in the series appeal, namely that of those indigenous traditions that regard the earth as an animate being with whom humans are in relationship, or, in broadly similar terms, that of the Gaia hypothesis which proposes that the earth acts as if it were a kind of self-regulating superorganism.⁴³

Second, and related to this, the presentation of the ecojustice principles as a *starting point* for critical interpretation of the Bible, rather than being (explicitly) derived from the Bible, means that these values serve, in effect (whether or not in intention), as a critical measuring rod – a canon, in the original sense of that word – for biblical texts, which may be resisted or retrieved, praised or criticized, depending on how far they show themselves to be in line with the principles, to be green or grey.⁴⁴ Moreover, the

⁴² See, e.g. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 84. Cf. also the brief comment of Marlow, *Biblical Prophets*, 89 n. 32.

⁴³ For the importance of such indigenous perspectives to the Earth Bible Project, see, e.g. Earth Bible Team, "Conversations with Gene Tucker and Other Writers", 30; "The Voice of Earth: More Than Metaphor?," in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, 26. For a brief introduction to Lovelock's perspectives on Gaia, see James Lovelock, "The Fallible Concept of Stewardship of the Earth," in R.J. Berry (ed.), *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 106-11. The major early publication in which this hypothesis was articulated was James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: OUP, 1979).

⁴⁴ Cf. the rather sharp criticism expressed by F. Gerald Downing, "Review of Norman Habel and Vicky Balabanski (eds.), *the Earth Story in the New Testament*", *Biblical Interpretation* 12 (2004) 311-13. Marlow, *Biblical Prophets*, 84-95, is also critical of the way in which the ecojustice principles form a 'determinative' method which shapes in advance what is found in the texts. Anne Elvey is also right to insist, though, that the Earth Bible approach does not only encourage resistance to biblical texts, but also their positive (if critical) retrieval. See Anne Elvey, "Interpreting the Time: Climate Change and the Climate in/of the Gospel of Luke", in Anne Elvey and David Gormley O'Brien (eds), *Climate Change – Cultural Change: Religious Responses and Responsibilities* (Preston, Vic: Mosaic, 2013), 78-91, at 79 n. 4.

establishment of ecojustice principles at the outset, as the initial step in the act of interpretation, implies that we can ‘know’ what we need to know about the content and character of ecological commitment independently of the Bible, of doing biblical exegesis, and can then ask (subsequently) how far such knowledge is also glimpsed in the Bible.⁴⁵ What such an approach does not seem to do is to give the Bible any *formative* role in the construction of ecojustice principles – something that would be essential for the generation of an authentically and distinctively Christian form of ecological commitment, which would, furthermore, have to be formulated in (Christian) theological language. We need, I would suggest, a conceptualization of the process of engagement with the Bible in which ecological principles can *both* emerge from, *and also* act as a critical lens for, our reading.

One may also question whether the step of identification, and specifically the imaginative construction of a voice of earth, so central to Habel’s work and the Earth Bible Project, need be central and essential to a theological ecological hermeneutic. This focus is formed in part by analogy with approaches such as feminist interpretation, which fundamentally entails giving voice to the perspective and experience of women. Yet the value of articulating a voice of Earth may be questioned from at least two perspectives. First, one might wonder, on scientific and ecological grounds, whether it is cogent to imagine a ‘voice’ with which Earth speaks, not only because of the unavoidable anthropomorphism involved, but also because of the difficulty of assuming that diverse

⁴⁵ Francis Watson traces such an approach back to Kant’s *Religion within the Limits of Reason alone* (1793): “Kant’s work is the forerunner of all more recent attempts to interpret scripture on the basis of an ethical-political criterion that is already known independently of the texts. Scripture can only say what the criterion allows it to say [or, we might add, is criticised and resisted where it does not say this], and what it is allowed to say is only what we can already say to ourselves even without scripture. The textual embodiment of the criterion is of only limited usefulness, for the particularity of biblical narrative is an imperfect and potentially misleading vehicle for the universal truths of reason or for the various contemporary projects of liberation”. Francis Watson, “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture: Why They Need Each Other,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010), 118-43 (139).

creatures and ecosystems share a perspective that can be articulated in univocal terms.⁴⁶ It is at least open to question whether this is the best (or only) way to engage in ecological hermeneutics. A second perspective is a more theological one, and applies particularly to examples in which the interpreter constructs a voice of earth which is nowhere found, let alone voiced, in the text, but arises from a creative and often contrary imagination – for instance, imagining the cries of Earth against the injustice perpetrated against it, by humans or by God.⁴⁷ While such exercises can be provocative and stimulate thought⁴⁸ the imaginative constructions do not carry the same kind of theological weight or status as a positive interpretation of what the text itself might say, in terms of the potential to contribute constructively to an ecological biblical theology.

In contrast to the volumes in the Earth Bible series, Habel's *An Inconvenient Text* (and, to a lesser degree, his Introduction to the co-edited *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*) gives some explicit consideration to the question of connections between ecological biblical interpretation and constructive theology. Indeed, in his book Habel is overtly writing for a Christian readership, making explicit suggestions as to what might constitute an authentic expression of 'our faith in Christ' (p. 77, quoted above).⁴⁹ As noted above, he offers a theological – or more exactly, christological – criterion for choosing green over grey texts, drawing on the Lutheran principle, *Was Christum treibet*, 'what points to Christ' (p. 119), or, perhaps better, what promotes Christ. This, it seems to me, is a move in exactly the right direction – albeit a slightly puzzling one, given what

⁴⁶ Note the critical comments about the principle of voice made by Gene Tucker, and the various responses of the Earth Bible Team concerning the principle of voice, in Earth Bible Team, "Conversations with Gene Tucker and Other Writers", 29-30; "Voice of Earth"; "Ecojustice Hermeneutics", 7-10.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Habel, *The Birth*, 44-45; Kristin M. Swenson, "Earth Tells the Lessons of Cain," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 38; Peter Trudinger, "How Lonely Sits the City: Reading Lamentations as City and Land," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 52; Alice M. Sinnott, "An Earthling's Lament: Hell on Earth," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 112.

⁴⁸ As also, e.g., in an imaginative collection such as Philip R. Davies, *Yours Faithfully: Virtual Letters from the Bible* (London & Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2004).

⁴⁹ Also orientated explicitly to the context of the Christian churches, and to liturgy and preaching in particular, is Norman Habel, David Rhoads, and H. Paul Santmire (eds), *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2011).

Habel has written elsewhere⁵⁰ – giving an explicitly Christian theological criterion for critical and constructive engagement with the Bible. Despite being a more popular book, then, this work goes further than other essays in the Earth Bible series in addressing the need for an articulation of the kind of theological engagement needed to connect ecological readings of biblical texts coherently and cogently with contemporary ecotheology and ethics. A number of things, however, are needed to take such a theological perspective forward.

First, there is a need to guard carefully against any impression that such a criterion equates to a preference for the New Testament over the Old. Although Habel by no means represents such a position in his *oeuvre* as a whole, his comment that ‘the grey texts of the Old Testament are superseded and are no longer valid as expressions of our faith in Christ’ (p. 77) exemplifies the risk. A christological reading of the Bible is not the same as a reading in which the New Testament supersedes the Old, even if it is a reading in which certain christological perspectives from the NT provide a hermeneutical key to the whole of the (Christian) Bible. Such a christological criterion would operate just as critically in relation to some NT texts as to some OT ones.

Second, it is important to move beyond the overly simple notion that some texts may be identified as ‘green’ and others as ‘grey’. While this critical and discerning engagement with biblical texts is crucial, it is inadequate insofar as it fails to make clear a broader facet of such a critical engagement – namely, the extent to which *all* texts in the Bible are products of an ancient context, reflective of ancient mythological and cosmological presuppositions from a time when contemporary scientific ecological understanding (and pressures) were inconceivable. Moreover, *all* biblical texts are somewhat ambivalent and multivocal in terms of their potential ecological dimensions and cannot simply be categorized as green or grey. Even Romans 8 and Colossians 1,

⁵⁰ In a review of my book, *The Bible and the Environment*, Habel comments “I would... happily debate with [Horrell] the relative merit of a doctrinal lens over against an exegetical lens”, implying that he would reject my call for “doctrinal” lenses and argue instead for an “exegetical” one, while in *An Inconvenient Text* it seems to be precisely a doctrinal (christological) criterion which is deployed. See Norman Habel, ‘Review of David G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment*’, *Review of Biblical Literature* [<http://www.bookreviews.org>], 2011.

which Habel sees as of central importance, do not – despite much (over)easy appropriation in ecotheological literature – straightforwardly convey ecological principles or green commitments appropriate to the twenty-first century.⁵¹ We cannot directly read off ecojustice values or ethical commitments from any biblical text. This does not mean that biblical texts cannot speak in an inspiring and meaningful way to our modern ecological crisis, but it does mean that critical and constructive work is required in regard to all such texts, even the most apparently ‘green’ ones, to enable such a contribution to be made.

Towards a Critical and Constructive Theological Hermeneutic: The Exeter Project on the Bible in Environmental Ethics

My critical engagement with the recent work of Bauckham and Habel should already make clear why the approach I developed with Cheryl Hunt and Christopher Southgate may be characterised, if somewhat simplistically, as an attempt to articulate a hermeneutical position located somewhere between the kind of reading of recovery represented by Bauckham and the more critical perspective represented by Habel.⁵²

On the one hand, the recovery perspective too easily gives the impression that ecological theology and ethics can be ‘rediscovered’ in the pages of the Bible, once the texts are rescued from previous misinterpretation, and that the Bible can be exonerated from any criticism of its anti-environmental content and declared to be a ‘green’ book with a green message. Such an approach, I have argued, does not do justice either to the ambivalence and diversity of the biblical material, or to the extent to which constructive theological and ethical work is necessary for such ancient texts to meaningfully address our modern ecological crisis.

⁵¹ For reasons to be cautious about various aspects of these texts, see David G. Horrell, Cheryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 121-26; David G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology*, *Biblical Challenges in the Contemporary World* (London and Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2010), 78-80, 83-85.

⁵² Cf. also David G. Horrell, ‘The Ecological Challenge to Biblical Studies’, *Theology* 112 (2009) 163-171; *idem*, ‘Introduction’ in David G. Horrell, et al. (eds), *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 1-12.

On the other hand, Habel's approach, and that of the Earth Bible Project more generally, starts explicitly from a position of commitment to ecological values, encapsulated in the (non-theological) ecojustice principles, and – put crudely, but in the terms of *An Inconvenient Text* – from that basis proceeds to distinguish between grey and green texts. Moreover, the interpretative engagement that moves from suspicion to retrieval and identification is intended to hear – though also to imagine and create – a voice of earth that may run counter to what is actually found in the text. Insofar as our aim is to contribute to what James Nash has called 'the ecological reformation of Christianity' such an approach does not adequately theorise the way in which the Bible may play a formative and authoritative role in the construction of ecological theology and ethics.⁵³ It is difficult to see how *suspicion* of the texts can rightly form the *first step* in such a theological hermeneutic, even if it is a vital part of the reading process.⁵⁴ Habel's appeal in *An Inconvenient Text* to a christological criterion for choosing green over grey texts is a valuable step in the direction of just such a theologically-grounded yet critical ecological hermeneutics, but needs to be developed – in ways I have sketched above – beyond a somewhat simplistic appeal to Jesus' way of service not domination as the basis for choosing green over grey texts.

The approach I am advocating may thus be described as an attempt to engage in serious exegetical work that is, at the same time, explicitly shaped by the contemporary context of scientific knowledge and ecological challenge, in order to give the Bible, critically read, a formative role in the construction of contemporary ecotheology and ethics. For example, in an extended rereading of Paul's letters, Hunt, Southgate, and I begin (after the methodological and theoretical groundwork) with a close and critical reading of the key texts in Rom 8.19-23 and Col 1.15-20, analyzing the implicit narrative of creation's past, present and future, differently glimpsed in each text. These texts make an important contribution to an ecological reading of Paul, but they do not straightforwardly supply the content of ecotheology and ethics. Moreover, it is vital, we argue, to go beyond an appeal to a few favourite texts and to attempt a broader rereading of Pauline theology and ethics as a whole. We go on to show, therefore, that these key

⁵³ James A. Nash, "Toward the Ecological Reformation of Christianity," *Interpretation* 50 (1996) 5-15.

⁵⁴ Cf. also Marlow, *Biblical Prophets*, 94.

Pauline eco-texts provide a starting point for a wider reconfiguring of Pauline theology and ethics around the motif of God's reconciliation of the whole cosmos in Christ. The ethical imperative to show 'other-regard' can and should be extended beyond the ecclesial community, and beyond the human community, to include all things within its scope.⁵⁵ This is an attempt to construct a kind of Pauline ecotheology and ethics, but, crucially, there is no pretence that this entails a 'rediscovery' of the true meaning and intentions of Paul's writing nor a simple distinguishing of 'green' and 'grey' texts in Paul. On the contrary, we are explicit about the fact that such a constructive reading requires reading with, beyond, and even against Paul, rereading Paul in a way consciously shaped by the demands and insights of our contemporary situation.

Similarly, in a broader attempt to outline a critical, ecological biblical theology, I derive from the Bible a number of doctrinal lenses which might at the same time serve to reconfigure our reading of the Bible.⁵⁶ The notion of doctrinal lenses is derived from the work of Ernst Conradie, who proposes that such lenses – or, in his terms, doctrinal keys or constructs – are an important part of the process of biblical interpretation, serving 'to identify *both* the meaning of the contemporary context *and* of the biblical texts. They therefore (and simultaneously) enable the interpreter also to establish a *link* between text and contemporary context. Doctrinal constructs are not only employed to *find* similarities but to *construct* similarities, to *make* things similar, if necessary.'⁵⁷ What this model of biblical hermeneutics helps to make clear is that – whatever interpreters may say, or imply – it is never simply a matter of revealing (or rediscovering) what the Bible 'really says' but a more constructive and creative process in which the biblical text is construed, configured, recast, in a way that is unavoidably a reflection of contemporary priorities, such that it can bear meaningfully on the present. Such a reconfiguring inevitably brings

⁵⁵ Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, *Greening Paul*. For a concise overview of some of the key arguments, see also David G. Horrell, "A New Perspective on Paul? Rereading Paul in a Time of Ecological Crisis," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33 (2010) 3-30.

⁵⁶ Horrell, *Bible and the Environment*.

⁵⁷ Ernst M. Conradie, "Interpreting the Bible Amidst Ecological Degradation," *Theology* 112 (2009), 201. Cf. also *idem*, "The Road Towards an Ecological Biblical and Theological Hermeneutics," *Scriptura* 93 (2006), 305-14; "What on Earth Is an Ecological Hermeneutics? Some Broad Parameters," in Horrell et al., eds, *Ecological Hermeneutics*, 295-313.

certain texts to the centre of the theological picture and marginalizes others. Unlike the approach taken by Habel, this perspective makes clear how ecological doctrinal lenses can *both* emerge from a reading of the Bible *and* serve as a basis for critical engagement with it.

The doctrinal lenses I proposed were the goodness of all creation, humanity as part of the community of creation, interconnectedness in failure and flourishing, the covenant with all creation, creation's calling to praise God, and liberation and reconciliation for all things.⁵⁸ It is notable that these themes bear some similarity both with those central to Bauckham's book – especially the 'community of creation' – and with those encapsulated in the Earth Bible's ecojustice principles. However, in contrast to Bauckham, I do not imply that these themes are a consistent or univocal biblical perspective, but rather insist that there is some critical and constructive hermeneutical work entailed in giving central place to texts in which such themes may be found, and some theological discernment at work in deciding that such themes warrant a central place in the twenty-first century ecological reconfiguration of Christian doctrine. In contrast to Habel's ecojustice principles, these doctrinal lenses are explicitly cast in theological terms which derive (in part) from the biblical tradition. To speak of the earth as 'creation' is an obvious example. The ecojustice principles avoid such language, in order 'to enable scientists and biblical scholars to enter freely into debate on the issues'.⁵⁹ Yet an authentically biblical and Christian theology cannot speak 'neutrally' of the earth without at the same time emptying its talk of that which is central and constitutive of its very character as Christian theology. From this perspective the earth *is* creation, the creation of God, and humans are (therefore) creatures (among other creatures) – created.⁶⁰ As Conradie has shown, the ecojustice principles could be recast as in more theological terms, as a kind of (ecological) dogmatics in outline.⁶¹ But without such

⁵⁸ Horrell, *Bible and the Environment*, 129-37.

⁵⁹ Habel, 'Review of Horrell' [<http://www.bookreviews.org>].

⁶⁰ Thus, Karl Barth's frequent depiction of the human as 'creature' (*Geschöpf*) is one signal of the ecological potential of his theology, on which see Geoff Thompson, "Remaining Loyal to the Earth": Humanity, God's Other Creatures and the Bible in Karl Barth', in Horrell et al., eds, *Ecological Hermeneutics*, 181-95.

⁶¹ Conradie, "The Road", 311-12.

theological recasting, and without giving the Bible a more formative role in constructing such a dogmatics, such principles remain external to, and divorced from, the Christian tradition.

My own approach is therefore to seek ways in which a critical ecologically and theologically informed engagement with the Bible could help to reconfigure Christian doctrine, liturgy, and ethics. To give one brief example, the famous opening of the Westminster Catechism of 1647 frames its question and answer thus: ‘What is the chief and highest end of man? Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.’ We might wince at the gender-exclusive language and hastily recast ‘man’ as ‘humanity’, but that still leaves the focus firmly – and typically – on human beings, their salvation and relationship to God. Those biblical texts that point to the motif of all creation’s calling to praise God – and the development of comparable ideas in, say, Aquinas’ notion of the *telos* of all things – might help indicate the potential for recasting such convictions more broadly and inclusively, as something that is the calling of the whole creation.⁶² As Karl Barth puts it:

when man (*sic*) accepts his destiny in Jesus Christ... he is only like a late-comer slipping shamefacedly into creation’s choir in heaven and earth, which has never ceased its praise, but merely suffered and signed, as it still does, that in inconceivable folly and ingratitude its living centre man does not hear its voice, its response, its echoing of the divine glory, or rather hears it in a completely perverted way, and refuses to co-operate in the jubilation which surrounds him.⁶³

Such a move does not by itself achieve any (ecological) transformation of human behaviour, but it might help to shift the influence of the Christian tradition away from its preoccupation with human salvation (*from* the world) and at the same time to invest

⁶² On this theme of creation’s praise, see, in addition to the works listed in n. 21: Dominic Coad, “Creation’s Praise of God: A Proposal for a Theology of the Non-Human Creation,” *Theology* 112 (2009) 181-89; David G. Horrell and Dominic Coad, “‘The Stones Would Cry Out’ (Luke 19.40): A Lukan Contribution to a Hermeneutics of Creation’s Praise,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64 (2011) 29-44; Mark Wynn, “Thomas Aquinas: Reading the Idea of Dominion in the Light of the Doctrine of Creation”, in Horrell et al., eds, *Ecological Hermeneutics*, 154-64; Dominic J. Coad, “Creation’s Praise of God: An Ecological Theology of Non-Human and Human Being”, PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2010.

⁶³ Karl Barth, *CD* II.1, p. 648.

everything in creation with renewed (and eternal) – though not quite ‘intrinsic’ – value.⁶⁴ And that would, or at least should, carry implications not only for theology and liturgy but also for ethics and action.

Proposals and Prospects for the Future

By way of conclusion, rather than reiterate key arguments of this essay, I offer some brief reflections and proposals concerning the prospects and possibilities for ecological hermeneutics.

(1) We should not pretend that there is a single method that can define the procedure or technique of ecological hermeneutics. As in other areas of biblical study, there will continue to be a diversity of approaches and perspectives, united, in this case, under the fairly broad banner of an exploration of ecological themes and questions in biblical literature, driven by a concern for their contemporary relevance and importance. That would suffice as a wide and inclusive definition of the field. For example, the Earth Bible’s focus on ‘identification’ with Earth, and with articulating the voice of Earth, seems to me a valuable and thought-provoking exercise, but not one that ought to be regarded as essential to or definitive of what ecological hermeneutics is.

(2) The different perspectives that will continue within the broad field of ecological hermeneutics are, in part, reflective of different views of biblical authority. These are seldom explicitly acknowledged, let alone discussed or defended, within the context of ecological readings of the Bible, but are crucially formative of the perspectives scholars do and do not take. Even among the contributors to the Earth Bible project, I have suggested, there is evidence of such diversity, specifically in the distinction between those who do and do not exercise critical suspicion against the biblical texts themselves. It would be good for there to be more explicit discussion of what kinds of perspective on the Bible, its identity and authority, underlie different construals of ecological

⁶⁴ In distinction to the ecojustice principles, it is hard to see how one could find in biblical texts a declaration of the earth’s ‘intrinsic’ value, if by that we mean an inherent value, in and for itself. The focus on creation’s orientation to God certainly challenges any sense that the earth’s value is instrumental for human beings, but does so by replacing it with a sense of the value that all things (including humans) have in relationship, and ultimately in relationship to God.

hermeneutics, not least in order for those convictions to be critically probed and assessed, rather than left implicit beneath the surface of exegetical discussion.

(3) Also diverse are the kinds of relationship between biblical exegesis and Christian theology and ethics implicit in different modes of ecological hermeneutics. In part these reflect, once again, different models of biblical authority, but they also reflect diverse conceptions of the task of biblical studies and its relationship (if any) to contemporary theology and ethics. Even biblical studies in a rigorously historical or archaeological mode has some definable relationship to theology, even if that relationship is essentially a critical one. Likewise, there will be a spectrum of relationships in various kinds of ecological interpretation: some may intend primarily to engage in the critical task of exposing the negative ecological implications of biblical texts and thereby, like some other radical forms of feminist criticism, highlight how damaging, alien, or useless are the texts. Unlike some,⁶⁵ I do not regard such an approach as ephemeral or unimportant. On the contrary, one (though only one) of the contributions of biblical studies to theology has been and will continue to be to highlight the difficulties and problems with biblical texts, challenging any too easy appropriation of those texts in contemporary theological or ethical formulations. Other approaches – particularly those that operate in a mode of ‘recovery’ – imply a much more positive relationship to theology, though one that may also be criticized, in this case for downplaying the extent to which critical and constructive work is needed if ecological theology and ethics are to be plausibly shaped by the Bible. Again, one thing that would be good is more explicit reflection on what might be plausible construals of the relationship between ecological hermeneutics and ecotheology and ethics.

(4) Finally, it is clear that the challenge of our contemporary ecological crisis is not going to recede. One associated risk is perhaps that of a certain fatigue, whereby some simply become bored or overwhelmed by the constant prominence of this issue, trumpeted by those they might dismiss as fanatics, or doom-mongers. There is also the risk that ‘ecological hermeneutics’ becomes simply another in a long list of contemporary approaches to biblical studies, another special interest pursued by a few. But what one

⁶⁵ Note, for example, the comment of Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 11 n. 29.

might most hope for in the face of the long-term nature of the problems ahead is not for a clear and definable ‘method’ called ecological hermeneutics, with its own seminars and interest groups, but rather for the integration of ecological concerns and awareness into the field of biblical studies more generally. Just as feminist criticism has pressed for a move beyond the idea of ‘women’ as a separate topic, to be addressed by a specific method (and taught in special courses, on ‘women in the Bible’, or whatever), towards an insistence that issues of gender and inequality should *always* be among the considerations in any critical examination of biblical texts and scholarship, so too ecological hermeneutics might hope to press its claims and priorities into every part of the agenda for biblical studies. As I have shown elsewhere, it is striking, for example, how contemporary discussions of Pauline theology and ethics simply fail to register ecological issues as a topic for consideration.⁶⁶ We may perhaps hope for a situation – brought about by those who have championed the importance of ecological hermeneutics – in which biblical scholars (and theologians and ethicists too) simply cannot avoid the ecological issues and questions relevant to the texts they study and the world they as scholars inhabit. That would be an achievement to celebrate.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Horrell, “New Perspective?”

⁶⁷ I would like to thank Cheryl Hunt, Geoff Thompson, and David Tollerton for their helpful comments on a draft of this essay. Needless to say, they should not be held responsible for any errors or weaknesses that remain.