The Discussion about the Ecological Crisis from the Perspective of the Old Testament

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1. Introduction

In his recommendation of the book *Readings from the Perspective Earth* archbishop Desmond Tutu states that ‘resolving the ecological crisis of our planet is no longer a problem we can leave to the scientists. Just as we are all part of the problem, we are also part of the solution. We all need to come to terms with the forces that have created this crisis and the resources within our traditions that can motivate us to resolve the crisis. One of those traditions is our biblical heritage.’ Therefore we should study the Bible anew ‘to identify those passages which may have contributed to the crisis and to uncover those traditions which have valued Earth but been suppressed’ (Habel 2000:7). Correct as this incitement may be, Tutu seems to overlook the fact that the search for a relevant application of biblical texts has been going on already for many years. In 1972 James Barr delivered a lecture about ‘the ecological controversy and the Old Testament’ and already then he could say that ‘hardly a day passes without revelations of the danger threatened to our natural resources and our future life by toxic wastes, by ill-used pesticides, by all kinds of pollution of land, sea and air’ (Barr 1972:9). He rightly expected that this problem would be ‘a main centre of social and ethical discussion in the next decades’. In his lecture Barr reacts to the historian Lynn White who blamed the Bible for having contributed to the ecological crisis. White claimed that ‘especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropomorphic religion the world has seen’ and that this is grounded in the story of the creation in Genesis 1 where ‘God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes’ (White 1967:1205). Against this Barr maintains that the biblical foundations of the Jewish-Christian doctrine of creation do not tend in the direction of exploitation of the earth, but in the opposite direction: ‘away from a license to exploit and towards a duty to respect and to protect’ (Barr 1972:30).

Also James Loader took part in this discussion. In 1987 he contributed to a symposium in Pretoria about the relation between ecology and theology. He offered a clear survey of what already had been written on this subject and added – in line with James Barr – a number of important insights from the perspective of the Old Testament. The first is that man is pictured in Gen 1 and Ps 8 as both ruler of the earth and image of God and that these aspects cannot be separated: ‘If God’s style is love, care and respect for his creation, then that is also what human dominion over the earth should mean’ (Loader 1987:20). The second insight is described under the heading of the symbol order as it is found especially in the wisdom literature: man is part of the harmony of the cosmic order. Man should respect that. ‘If the harmony of God’s creation is disrupted by human action and labour, the only possible result is catastrophe’ (Loader 1987:22). In later publications Loader emphasized the element of wonder as it is found in many texts in the Old Testament full of ‘awe of the mysterious beauty of God’s creation’ (Loader 1991:54). There can be no doubt about it that the study of the Old Testament can attribute to modern ecological discussions. Loader even goes so far to suggest ‘that the ecological wheel was not, after all, invented by the Green Movement, but that it was already deeply reflected upon by the sapiential tradition’ (Loader 1990:159).

In my contribution to this Festschrift for James Loader I will discuss some recent studies on ecology and the Old Testament. Most of them are in line with his view that the study of the Old Testament
can make a positive contribution to the deliberations of our days. According to some the Bible is much more environmental friendly than suggested by White. Next to this there is also another approach, especially in the so-called Bible Earth project, which is more critical towards the Bible but also derives inspiration from it in reacting to the present ecological problems. Finally, an attempt will be made to sketch a third approach benefitting from what we learn negatively and positively from this evaluation.

2. The environmentally friendly Bible

For a long period the study of the theology of the Old Testament was dominated by the view that the Old Testament should be read in the first place as salvation history. As Gerhard von Rad indicated in his famous article published in 1936, ‘the doctrine of creation never attained to the status of a relevant, independent doctrine’. It is ‘invariably related, and indeed subordinated, to soteriological considerations’ (Von Rad 1984:62). Gen 1-11 is no more than the introduction to the history of salvation beginning with Abram in Gen 12. To this came a reaction initiated by the commentary on Genesis by Claus Westermann. In this and other publications he called for attention to the very important aspect of God’s blessings within biblical theology. In this connection it is also important to note the growing interest in the ancient Israelite wisdom literature because of its focus on creation, through which man can learn about the creator and his will. At the end of his career also Von Rad devoted an important study to this part of the biblical theology. This growing interest in creation and the earth as a part of creation could also lead to the conclusion that the Bible is not as anthropocentric as assumed by White. Westermann tersely formulates this as a conclusion to his expositions on Gen 1: ‘Ein Gott, der nur noch als der Gott des Menschen verstanden wird, ist nicht mehr der Gott der Bibel’ (Westermann 1974:242).

Terence Fretheim went one step (or perhaps more than one step) further on this path, in his ‘relational theology of creation’. He argues that creation presents the foundation for every aspect of theology. In his view the importance of creation has been overlooked and underestimated by both the church and the academy. Fretheim credits this ‘marginalization of creation’ (Fretheim 2005:iix) to a pervading anthropocentrism in the cultural-social-political world. Creation’s importance has been diminished by (1) a focus that sees salvation history as more important than creation; (2) a tendency to see all reality from the perspective of human existence; (3) a political theology centered on the liberation of the human that overlooks the nonhuman; (4) a view that God will destroy everything so one need not bother; and (5) a patriarchal view of God that emphasizes his mighty acts and neglects his so-called more feminine themes of blessing and creation. Fretheim notes that any contemporary interest in creation comes not from traditional realms such as the church or theological disciplines but from an ecological consciousness.

Central to his thinking is that creation exists apart from the history of human beings. God is the God of the entire cosmos; God has to do with every creature, and every creature has to do with God, whether they recognize it or not. God’s work in the world must be viewed in and through a universal form of reference. That the Bible begins with Genesis, not Exodus, with creation, not redemption, is of immeasurable importance. Key to Fretheim’s view of creation is that there is a relational creator who has made a relational world (Fretheim 2005:13). God freely enters into relationships with creatures. Indeed, a relationship which precedes a covenant with both a person and a nation (Fretheim 2005:15). The relational God has created a world in which all creatures are interrelated. Salvation is experienced by both human and nonhuman (Fretheim 2005:127). God’s providence in the wilderness has often lead Moses and others to sources of help that are already available in the world of creation (Fretheim 2005:128). Fretheim sees a relation to the modern use of natural elements in developing medicines.
God’s creation is at stake in Israel’s behaviors (Fretheim 2005:165). For example, Jer 12 links the land to creation. While God responds to Jeremiah’s mourning, God also mourns the distress that is coming upon the land and people (Fretheim 2005:179).

Biblical texts speak of the total dependence of creation on God, but the Bible also tells us that God has freely chosen to establish an interdependent relationship with the creation. God has freely chosen to be dependent upon both human and non-human in the furtherance of God’s purposes in the world (Fretheim 2005:270). Fretheim illustrates this with a reference to the praise by nature. He notes that humankind’s sinfulness may contribute to smog and that the heavens will declare the glory of God with less clarity on a smoggy day than on other days (Fretheim 2005:284). Continuing this line of thought, he says that environmental activity is directly related to the praise possibilities of nature. Humankind can enhance or inhibit the vocation of nature to praise its God.

In this line of thinking one can also place the work of Michael Northcott. This priest of the Scottish Episcopal Church and professor of ethics at the University of Edinburgh wrote a number of books in which he bases his struggle against institutions and ideas which are in his view responsible for the present ecological crisis on the Old Testament, especially on a number of prophecies and on some psalms. Again, the Bible is defended against the old accusation by new environmentalists, but also against the ‘standard Christian exegesis of the Hebrew Bible’ interpreting ‘the covenant as being primarily between God and humans, and the creation myth primarily in terms of the dominion of humanity over the creation’ (Northcott 1996:172). Instead, the Hebrew Bible teaches us according to Northcott the ‘fundamental ecological and theological truth’ that the worship of God, justice and the goodness of the land are connected (Northcott 1996:173).

Northcott states that global warming is the earth’s prophetic judgment on the global market empire, and on the heedless consumption it fosters. As a framework for his latest book Northcott uses an inter-play between the prophetic tradition in the Old Testament and scientific findings on human induced climate change. He sees a parallel between the geo-political crisis of ancient Israel and the eco-political crisis which faces the modern world. ‘At the heart of the pathology of the ecological crisis is the refusal of humans to see themselves as creatures, contingently embedded in networks of relationships with other creatures, and with the Creator. This refusal is the quintessential root of what theologians call sin’ (Northcott 2007:16). The role of the prophets in Israel was primarily to point to the consequences of turning away from God’s revelation. Jeremiah, whom he characterizes as ‘the first ecological prophet in literary and religious history’ (Northcott 2007:12), features large in his book, especially his religious reading of lessons offered by the desolated land itself as judgments given by God.

Important texts for Northcott are also the prophecy in Hos 4:1-3, showing the relation between blessing, curse and nature, and texts showing respect for nature, especially for the cedars of the Lebanon, like Hos 14:4-7. He can also point the fact that the description of salvation is pictured as the restoration of nature in the prophecies of Isa 35; 65:20ff and Ezek 47. A poem like Ps 72 shows the combination of righteousness and the wellbeing of nature.

The greatest prophetic role is preserved for earth itself, when the planet gives his message through hurricane Katrina, floods in Bangladesh, or forest-fires in Spain (Northcott 2007:17). Apparently, Northcott sees himself as a present-day Jeremiah. Like Jeremiah, he interprets ecological collapse and the related human tragedy as God’s judgment. And like the prophet, he also offers hope for redemption in the form of confession, restitution, and repentance.
In this way the Bible, especially the Old Testament, plays a positive part in the ecological discussion. It shows ways of solving the problems. In his Groningen dissertation of 1997 the Dutch environmentalist Jan Boersema derives important insights from the Torah for his contribution to the debate on the sustainability of the earth. From Gen 1 he learns that not man but Sabbath is the crown on God’s creation. Gen 2 tells him the story of the imperfect nature, whereas the dietary laws are a reference to the ideal creation as it was meant by God. They teach us respect for blood, warn us against abuse of power, let us look for purity and unity. Taking one’s inspiration from the Torah may also help us to find the right attitude: ‘In the quest for solutions, a knowledge of the major wellsprings of our culture enables us to avoid the scylla of hubris and the charybdis of cynism’ (Boersema 2001:250).

The problem with this ‘Bible friendly’ approach is that it lets the Bible answer questions which did not arise in biblical times. It is based on a in many way different picture of the relation between man and nature than it was experienced by the people who wrote and first read the Bible (Houtman 1982).

3. The Earth Bible Project

A more radical approach, less friendly towards the Bible but perhaps also more realistic, is found in the so-called ‘Earth Bible Project’. It can be compared to the critical feminist way of reading the Bible. It takes as its starting point the conviction that the earth is abused and that we have to do something about it. The Bible is read according to the hermeneutics of suspicion: looking for elements that may have attributed to this abuse.

In this project a number of studies has been published, most of them edited by Norman Habel. Participants of the project have to agree with six ‘eco-justice principles’ of the project (Habel 2008:2). The participants of the project acknowledge that they as Western scholars are the heirs of a long patriarchal and anthropocentric approach to reading the text of the Bible and that this approach has devalued the earth tremendously. Before reading the text, one therefore has to declare and even confess that in one way or another we are responsible for the exploitation, oppression, and endangering of the existence of living creatures forming the earth community. The flip side of the coin is to become progressively conscious that we are members of an endangered earth community in dialogue with ancient texts. Participants experience the earth as a subject (it is usually written therefore as a name, with a capital and without the article) and relate to her more empathetically than rationally. The basic point of the project is to develop techniques of reading the text to discern and retrieve alternative traditions where the voice of the earth and of the earth community has been suppressed.

A new ‘ecological hermeneutic’ has been developed in order to let the voice of the earth be heard (Habel 2008:3). The intrinsic worth of the earth as subject can be discerned in the text, which has three interrelated steps: suspicion, identification, and retrieval. In terms of a hermeneutic of suspicion, especially two phenomena are deconstructed. The first is an anthropocentric reading; the second is the reification of nature, which leads to a dualism between humans and nature. A hermeneutic of identification is one of solidarity and empathy, acknowledging the kinship with the earth. By contrast, a hermeneutic of retrieval is the recognition of the earth and of the members of the earth as subjects with a voice.

So, for instance, Kristin Swenson describes the Gen 4 narrative from the point of view of Earth. As a witness of Cain killing Abel she observes that Cain had to learn that it is not enough to guard and protect the earth. ‘Taking care of Earth cannot be done without taking care of others and vice
versa’ (Swenson 2008:38). From the fact that neither God nor Earth prevented Cain from murder she deduces that we should not expect God to step in to correct the effects of our destructive actions on earth, nor that the earth will find a way to save itself (Swenson 2008:39).

A very radical and therefore also very clear example of this approach was given by Norman Habel in an ‘ecological reading’ of Gen 1:26-28, in which he tries to give word to ‘the oppressed message from Earth’ instead of the usual anthropocentric reading. Earth speaks of herself as ‘the source of daily life for the flora and fauna that I have generated from within me’. To this she adds: ‘Sad to say, there is another story that has invaded my world, the story of the god-image creatures called humans. Instead of recognizing that these creatures are beings interdependent with Earth and other Earth creatures, this story reduces Earth and Earth creatures to being subjects of a ruling class, thereby demeaning them and diminishing their value. And instead of respecting me as their home and life source, the god-images are given a mandate to crush me like an enemy or slave. My voice needs to be heard and the intrusive story about the humans in Gen 1:26-28 named for what it is: the charter of a group of power-hungry humans’ (Habel 2006:41).

Giving the earth its own voice, so much may have become clear, implies that not only certain interpretation of the Bible are corrected but also that some biblical stories and ideas have to give way to ecologically improved alternatives.

4. A theocentric approach

The Jewish author Manfred Gerstenfeld comes with a serious warning against this modern tendency of reading the Bible from an environmental friendly perspective. He notes the danger of the old heresy of the deification of nature. Ecology can turn into nature religion, against which Israel’s prophets have been fighting for so long. Previously some critics in the discussions about Bible and environment spoke of the ‘cult of nature’ (Houtman 1982:104), Gerstenfeld goes further noting a ‘relationship between environmentalism and paganism or Nazism’ (Gerstenfeld 1998:90).

He calls for a theocentric approach. In Jewish tradition this has always taken precedence over the anthropocentric approach and this also helped to keep humankind within its legitimate boundaries. Jewish culture also shows that the theocentric approach, more than with the anthropocentric approach, goes along with a great respect for nature. On this point he also criticizes Lynn White. In the first place it is wrong to speak of ‘the Judeo-Christian tradition’: ‘his article mainly dealt with Christianity’s responsibility for the environmental crisis’ (Gerstenfeld 1998:228). Secondly, according to classical Judaism creation serves God’s plans. It does not place man in the center: ‘Many things are there to teach man a lesson, rather than serve his purposes as he sees them’ (Gerstenfeld 1998:229).

Although Gerstenfeld may be right in criticizing a simplified combination of Jewish and Christian tradition, his emphasis on the theocentric aspect is in line with what is remarked in this discussion previously by scholars like Barr and Loader. They have pointed out that the most important thing that can be added from the biblical theological side to the ongoing debate in our society about the right way to handle the ecological crisis is this respect for nature as God’s creation. Bringing God into play means that one does not only want to take responsibility towards nature and to the next generations, but also towards God. This gives a special perspective upon things, upon the analyses we make and upon the actions we have to take.

The confrontation with an old sacred text like Ps 72 can be helpful. This poem, which also plays an important part in the deliberations of Northcott, is about the relation between God and the king as someone who has power and resources. A good king is someone who relates to God and receives
from God the command and the inspiration to act righteously. This righteousness has to do in the first place with people, especially powerless people. It has also repercussions upon the earth. The earth is not only used, but also blessed by the action of a righteous king. In the Psalm it is a metaphor, but in our situation it can be applied in the debate about the environment, emphasizing the relatedness of God, man and nature.

This relation between God, man and nature is also the central theme in the biblical stories about the creation and its counterpart, the flood. Read together these stories give much food for thought concerning the way man has to take his responsibilities. To start with, it is important to note that Gen 1:26-28

Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’

(translation: NIV)

is repeated in 9:6-7:

‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man. As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it.’

Apparently the new situation, after man having proven to be sinful, did not change his special position in relation with God. Man looks like his creator in so far as he and she have the ability and task of procreation. With regard to the other creatures things have changed, as can be derived from the preceding verses (9:1-5):

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them: ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.’

What remains the same, however, is that man is responsible to God for what he is doing with other creatures. It is precisely this theocentric approach which is important here. Man has to be aware of the boundaries set by God. The story of the flood gives a number of important indications about how to behave in handling nature. Much attention is paid to the preservation of all animals. In their variety, not excluding one of them, they are a precious element of creation. Killing appears to be an inevitable part of the relation between man and animal, but it is bound to certain limits. Blood, as the seat of life, deserves respect.

Although man is still called the image of God, he is not a co-creator. His power is limited, as becomes apparent clearly in the story of the tower of Babel in Gen 11.
The present ecological crisis may in some respects also incite us – in line with the Bible Earth Project – to go beyond the original meaning of a biblical text or to criticize it. I tentatively suggest to do so with regard to Gen 9:9-11 about God making a covenant with Noah and through him with mankind and the earth:

‘I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you-- the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you-- every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.’

This covenant is presented as everlasting. Applied to the present situation one could interpret it as a reassurance over against panicky environmentalists predicting a speedy end of the world. Why should we worry? Trust in God’s promise!

I suggest, however, to compare it with the ‘everlasting’ covenants God made with Abraham and David, which in the end were broken. The message of the prophets to Israel and Judah in that situation was that the covenant with God was broken because of the sins of the people. The exile showed that one should not underestimate the human responsibility. Can the present ecological crisis be interpreted as a similar example of human transgression bringing about a destruction God did not want to happen again?

Is this the most important contribution from biblical theology to the modern discussions about global warming: that mankind has crossed the borders set by God? Or, to put it more positively in the line of Ps 72: is the road to the flourishing of man and nature not the pursuit of righteousness?

5. Literature


