

Review Article

**TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL
BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS:
A REVIEW ESSAY ON THE EARTH BIBLE PROJECT**

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Abstract

This review essay on the five volumes of the Earth Bible series focuses on the critical Biblical hermeneutics employed in the series. It describes the background of the project within the context of the emergence of ecological theology and assesses the significance of the project towards the development of an ecological Biblical hermeneutics.

1. Introduction

The Earth Bible series is by far the most significant product of scholarly attempts to read the Bible from an ecologically sensitive perspective. Five volumes have now been published in this series edited by Norman Habel (Flinders University of South Australia) and jointly published by Sheffield Academic Press and The Pilgrim Press. The five volumes focus on the themes of biblical hermeneutics (the first more general volume), Genesis, wisdom, the Psalms and the prophets and the New Testament.

The Earth Bible project has been located at the Centre for Theology, Science and Culture associated with the Adelaide College of Divinity and Flinders University of South Australia. While the series has a strong Australian impetus, much attention has been given to invite contributors that would be representative in terms of gender, race and geographical context. Several South African biblical scholars have also contributed to the series.

The Earth Bible series include a large number of exegetical essays that are generally of a very high standard. In several cases scholars who have completed major research projects on a particular text were invited to employ an ecological hermeneutics in rereading that particular text. Moreover, the contributions often exemplify a welcome creativity in relating Biblical exegesis with contextual concerns. They often succeed in integrating scholarship with artistic expression. Together these essays offer an invaluable resource for preachers and teachers concerned to promote earthkeeping practices in local Christian communities. It is indeed somewhat of a pity that the series has now been completed and that more volumes have not been envisaged. It would certainly have been possible to add a volume on the law codes in the Pentateuch, to develop the volume on the Psalms and the prophets into two volumes so that more justice could be done to both these corpuses, and, given the significance of the New Testament in Christian worship, to have separate volumes on the synoptic gospels, the Johannine literature and the Pauline / deuterio-Pauline letters. It would be impossible to comment any further on the individual exegetical contributions in this review.

The Earth Bible team employs an ideology-critical hermeneutic articulated in six “ecojustice principles” in reading the Bible. These principles seek to come to terms with the pervasive

anthropocentrism that has been present in the production of the biblical texts, that is evident in the surface structure of the text and that has distorted the history of interpretation and contemporary reinterpretations of the Bible. In his series foreword, Archbishop Desmond Tutu comments on the significance of this project as follows: "I commend the writers for daring to read the biblical text afresh from the perspective of Earth. Feminists have forced us to confront the patriarchal orientation of much of the biblical text. Earth Bible writers are now confronting us with the anthropocentric nature of much of the biblical text. We now ask: Does the text devalue Earth by making the self-interest of humans its dominant concern?" In his preface to the fifth volume, Denis Edwards adds that, "It would be hard to overstate the importance of this project. My own conviction is that there is no more urgent task for biblical scholars than the work undertaken in these volumes."

In this review of the Earth Bible series I will focus on the ecological hermeneutics that it employs. I will first place the project within the context of the emergence of ecological theology in general and contributions from biblical scholars in particular. I will then discuss and assess the hermeneutics employed in the Earth Bible series before offering a proposal on how an ecological hermeneutics may be understood. The essay will conclude with some comments on the challenge that the Earth Bible series, and the ecological hermeneutics that it employs, pose to a critical reformulation of Christian doctrine.

2. The Emergence of an Ecological Theology

Since the early 1970's a wealth of publications has emerged in the field of what may now be called ecological theology. Almost every aspect of Christian theology has come under the spotlight in the process: Biblical Studies, Biblical hermeneutics, the history of Christianity in its many traditions and forms of spirituality, Christian doctrine, Christian virtues and values, preaching, ministry, pastoral care, Christian education, mission, and a theology of religions.

At first, ecological theology was dominated by an apologetic approach. This apologetic approach should largely be understood as a response to a famous article by the American historian Lynn White published in 1967 and entitled "The historical roots of our ecological crisis."¹ In this article White argued that the Christian tradition itself bears a "huge burden of guilt" for fostering the worldview underlying the present ecological crisis. White's article placed the blame for the ecological crisis squarely upon Western Christianity. His thesis is a variation on Weber's famous analysis of the relationship between Christianity and capitalism, i.e. that Protestantism has encouraged capitalism that, in turn, exploited nature. White argued that it is but a small step from the Christian notion of the dominion of man(!)kind over nature to the senseless exploitation of nature for human benefit. Compared to the emphasis on the sacredness of nature in most other religions, the Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation has led to a "disenchantment of nature." Biblical religion has expelled the gods from the forests and streams once and for all. Moreover, the notion of "dominion" over nature gave impetus to the rise of Western science by encouraging empirical investigations of the "book of nature". White maintained that exploitative attitudes toward nature surfaced widely during the medieval period and that this was encouraged by the anthropocentrism of the dominant theology of the time. Christianity has given religious support to the notion that the world has been created primarily for the benefit of human beings. Modern science is an extrapolation of medieval natural theology while technology constitutes a realisation of the Christian notion of human mastery of nature. The Judeo-Christian tradition, and its typical vision of a better future, has had a lasting influence on

1. White (1967).

the Western world, also through variants of this tradition such as Marxism and secularism. White therefore concludes that: “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt.”

White’s article soon led to a heated debate. Many have tried to refute his thesis by indicating some of its oversimplifications.² Despite the perceived shortcomings of White’s thesis, it almost single-handedly sparked off the discussion of environmental issues in Christian theology. Numerous studies have tried to defend Christianity against White’s accusations by retrieving the ecological wisdom in the Biblical roots of the Christian tradition and in its subsequent history, its doctrines and ethos, its forms of spirituality and praxis. It is therefore argued that Christianity, if interpreted adequately, is not the cause of the environmental crisis but can offer ecological wisdom that may be crucial for responsible earthkeeping.

The shortcomings of Lynn White’s thesis should not distract one’s attention from the all too real complicity of Christianity in the historical processes that led to the present environmental crisis.³ It simply cannot be denied that the technological control over nature (and the exploitation of natural resources) by human beings was all too often explicitly or implicitly legitimised by Christian notions of dominion over the earth. David Hallman adds that:

I believe that churches in the North have not yet come to grips with the degree to which Christian theology and tradition are implicated in the Western capitalist development model that has dominated our countries since the industrial revolution, many other countries through the colonial periods and more recently every part of the world that is touched by the new “global economy.” This goes well beyond the famous critique of Lynn White Jr. and the theological responses to it.⁴

The Christian tradition (including the Biblical texts) is far more ambiguous than some apologists are willing to acknowledge. Christian thinkers usually do acknowledge that Christian attitudes towards nature have been far from innocent. However, as apologists for the Christian tradition usually argue, this is a serious aberration from authentic Biblical and Christian attitudes to the environment. A distinction has to be made between Christianity and Christendom. It is not Christian or biblical faith that is to blame, but modern *interpretations* of Christianity. Although this is certainly the case, there is an unhelpful tendency to merely justify the Bible and the Christian faith in the process.

Due to this ecological ambiguity of Christianity, a Christian confession of guilt (and not just of faith) may be the more appropriate response. The environmental crisis has not only led to the claim that Christianity could and should make an important contribution to a more adequate understanding of the role of humanity in nature. It has also led to calls for a critical reassessment of the Christian faith itself. Many theologians have suggested that there is a clear need to transform Christian theology into an ecological theology. James Nash, for example, suggests that an ecological “reformation” of Christianity implies that

2. Granberg-Michaelson (1989:33) has neatly summarised a number of conclusions reached in the twenty years following the publication of White’s article:

First White’s description of biblical teaching regarding the environment is selective and highly distortive.

Second his argument that Christianity paved the way for the scientific and technological revolutions is very questionable.

And third, his assumption that environmental destruction has flowed solely from the mindset of Western culture, and not from others, is historically dubious.

3. Boff (1997:78f) lists six points of an anti-ecological accent in the Jewish and Christians traditions: 1) the adoption of the cultural framework of patriarchy, 2) the separation between creature and Creator through monotheism, 3) the use of monotheism to justify authoritarianism and centralised power, 4) the anthropocentrism of human dominion over the earth, 5) the tribal ideology of divine election, 6) the notion that nature itself is fallen and that the earth is punished as a result of human sin.

4. Hallman (1994:5).

there are significant flaws in the Christian tradition - else a reformation would not be necessary. It also implies that these flaws can be corrected - else a reformation would not be possible. He adds that reformation is fortunately not something alien to the Christian faith (see the protestant axiom of *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*).⁵

Ecological theology may, in my view, now be regarded as a next wave of contextual theology. It joins liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, womanist theology and various indigenous theologies in the quest for a theology that can respond to the challenges of our time. Ecological theology is an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom in Christianity as a response to environmental threats.⁶ At the same time, it is also an attempt to reinvestigate, rediscover and renew the Christian tradition in the light of the challenges posed by the environmental crisis. Ecological theology therefore offers a two-fold critique: a Christian critique of the cultural habits underlying ecological destruction and an ecological critique of Christianity.⁷

3. The Emergence of an Ecological Approach to Biblical Studies

Until recently, the dominant approach of contributions to an ecological theology from within the field of Biblical Studies was shaped by two related factors. Many contributions were deliberately aimed at defending Christianity against the accusations of Lynn White and several other secular critics. Secondly, most contributions tried to retrieve some ecological wisdom from the Biblical texts. The assumption was therefore that the Bible can indeed offer profound ecological wisdom but that this has all too often remained hidden or implicit. The task of new exegetical studies is therefore to uncover such ecological wisdom.

In numerous contributions, Biblical scholars have offered a broad overview of Old Testament and New Testament perspectives on the environment. Typically, such overviews focus on a few favourite texts such as Genesis 1-2, the theme of the covenant (e.g. Genesis 6-9), the Sabbatical laws (e.g. Lev 25), Job 37-39, some of the Psalms (8, 19, 24, 98, 104), some prophetic texts such as Isaiah 9-11, 40f, 65, Ezek 36, Joel, Amos, some of the sayings of Jesus (e.g. in Matt 6:28-30, 10:29-31), Romans 8:18-23, Colossians 1 and Revelation 21-22. The selection of these texts is quite understandable since they deal explicitly with nature or with a theology of creation.

The insights on ecological wisdom emerging from these contributions cannot be discussed in any detail. A few comments regarding the hermeneutical approach that is followed in this regard are important though:

- The selection of some favourite texts may unintentionally reinforce the perception that ecology is indeed a marginal concern in the Bible. The focus may be far too narrow. It only relates to an aspect of creation theology or, more specifically, to the relationship (of stewardship?) between human beings and nature. Accordingly, an environmental concern is one aspect of a Christian ethos, but it does not really belong to the heart of the Christian gospel. By contrast, a retrieval of the ecological wisdom in the Biblical traditions has to be doctrinally comprehensive. This implies that texts dealing with creation, providence, humanity, sin, redemption, the church, the sacraments and eschatological consummation have to be retrieved from an ecological perspective.

5. See Nash (1996).

6. For an assessment of the state of the debate in ecological theology, see my "Guide to the literature", together with an indexed bibliography (Conradie 2001).

7. Feminist theology, likewise, engages in a twofold critique, "not only a Christian critique of sexist or patriarchal culture but also a feminist critique of Christianity" (Anne Carr as quoted in Graff 1995:7).

- Another way of broadening the scope of such a retrieval of ecological wisdom is to trace the Bible for references to the earth, mountains, hills, air, waters, rivers, soil, trees, animals, birds, insects, etc. It is important to read the whole Bible through ecological lenses. This soon leads to the discovery that the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is indeed “filled to the brim” with ecological overtones. The earth and all its creatures are intimately interwoven with God’s loving care for humanity.
- At the same time, an ecological hermeneutics has to consider the suspicion that many Biblical texts do not escape from an anthropocentric bias. With liberation theologians and feminist theologians, ecological theologians have to come to terms with the discovery that the Bible itself does not necessarily support a particular cause, in this case an ecological ethos. Critics have argued that Biblical texts, more often than not, show a preoccupation with human well-being and that the interests of other creatures and the voice of the earth itself are as a result marginalised. This calls for a more critical hermeneutics in which it is *not* presupposed that the Bible must be “rescued” against environmental critics. All the evidence has to be taken into account for an investigation into the ecological thrust of a particular Biblical text. An ecological hermeneutics therefore has to operate not only with a hermeneutics of trust but also with one of suspicion.

4. The Earth Bible Project and its Ecological Hermeneutics

A critical ecological hermeneutics is adopted most notably and most radically in the “Earth Bible” project. The Earth Bible team employs a highly critical hermeneutic articulated in six “ecojustice principles” to interpret the Bible and to promote justice and healing for the earth. What does this imply?

In his introductory essay to the project, Habel explains that the widespread sense of environmental crisis has stimulated the emergence of a new “Earth consciousness”. This is the awareness that humans are not in control of natural ecosystems but that all forms of life are interconnected and that we are deeply dependent on the complex web of relationships that allows life on Earth to flourish. The term “Earth” (without the definite article) suggests the “living system within which we humans live in a relationship of interdependence with other members of the Earth community.”⁸ Moreover, the sense of Earth community calls for “Earth justice”, the call to resist the violation of ecosystems in solidarity with all the marginalised and threatened species and specimens. This emerging Earth consciousness invites and challenges us to revisit our religious traditions (and sacred texts) from the perspective of the Earth community. In the words of Habel, “This new Earth consciousness invites us, as (sic) members of the Earth community, to return to the Bible, and in dialogue with the text, ascertain whether a similar kinship with Earth is reflected here.”⁹ We have to “interrogate the biblical heritage to ascertain whether Earth is silenced, oppressed or liberated in the Bible.”¹⁰

The focus of the Earth Bible project is not merely a renewed interest in creation theology and in the Earth as part of creation, but in the voice of Earth in the text itself. The Earth is not so much a topic in the text but a voice or (often marginalised) presence in the text that has to be listened to. In this way, Earth becomes a subject (with a voice in its own right) and not so much an object in the Biblical texts. This calls for a reflecting *with* Earth

8. Habel (2000:27).

9. Habel (2000:26).

10. Habel (2000:26).

and not so much *about* the Earth, in the same way that feminist Biblical scholars would want to read the Bible in solidarity *with* oppressed women and not *for* them. Habel explains this point of departure in his introductory essay to the project:

(This) involves a move away from searching the text to study the theme or topic of Earth, as part of a creation theology or any other theology. Rather, we are identifying, as far as possible, with Earth or the earth community, as we converse with the text. We no longer consider ourselves readers within the hierarchy of creation, but fellow members within the community of Earth. We are no longer reading as stewards over creation, but as kin, relatives within the Earth community. We no longer see ourselves as pilgrims *on* Earth, but as a species *in* Earth, beneath a common protective skin called the atmosphere.¹¹

The “Earth Bible” project therefore explores the Biblical texts from the perspective of the Earth, suspecting that the text and / or its interpreters may be anthropocentric and not geocentric. It asks whether there is a concern for Earth community in the text or whether Earth is being treated unjustly in the text. It attempts to retrieve alternative traditions that hear the voice of the earth and that value the earth more than as a human instrument. On this basis, the Earth Bible team have identified the following six guiding ecojustice principles for Biblical interpretation:¹²

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

The articulation of these principles helps to pose new questions to the Biblical texts. This may lead to the discovery of new concepts, insights and dimensions embedded in the text that may not have been seen before. Does this not fall into the trap of reading one’s own assumptions into the text? The Earth Bible team acknowledge this danger but argues that each interpreter approach a text with a set of governing assumptions that often remain unarticulated and subconscious and that are therefore even more dangerous. The danger of reading into the text randomly may be avoided if the articulation of such ecojustice principles is done in conjunction with historical, literary and cultural modes of analysis.¹³

The approach of the Earth Bible project may clearly be described in terms of a “hermeneutic of suspicion”. Together with the approaches to Biblical interpretation derived from psychoanalytical theory, Marxism, feminist theology and liberation theology, a critical ecological hermeneutics articulate the suspicion that the Biblical texts and their interpretations have been distorted as a result of an anthropocentric bias that marginalises

11. Habel (2000:34).

12. See Habel (2000:42-53) for a detailed discussion of these principles.

13. Habel & Wurst (2000:21-33).

other creatures and the voice of the Earth itself. Its suspicion is that “biblical texts, written by humans to meet human circumstances, will reflect human interests at the expense of the non-human Earth community.”¹⁴ It acknowledges that we as members of the human community have indeed exploited, oppressed and endangered the existence of the Earth community. It therefore seeks to ascertain whether Earth and Earth community are silenced or liberated in the production, transmission and interpretation of particular Biblical texts. It wishes to allow the often marginalised voices of Earth to be heard again. And, as a “hermeneutic of retrieval”, it seeks to discern and retrieve alternative traditions that would allow Earth community to flourish yet again.

5. Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics

On the basis of this discussion of the hermeneutic employed in the Earth Bible project, I will now offer a constructive proposal on how the notion of an ecological Biblical hermeneutics may be developed somewhat further. The gist of this proposal is to extend such an ecological hermeneutics beyond its ideology-critical function in order to develop a hermeneutical theory that would touch on all aspects of the interpretation process.

What, then, is an ecological hermeneutics? The use of the term “hermeneutics” in concepts such as a “feminist hermeneutics”, a “liberation hermeneutics”, or an “African hermeneutics” is rather misleading. It is often simply used as a rough synonym for a particular form of theology. In this sense one may also speak of a “reformed hermeneutics”, a “Lutheran hermeneutics”, an “evangelical hermeneutics”, a “Pentecostal hermeneutics”, a feminist hermeneutics, or a “hermeneutics of liberation”. At best, this use of the concept “hermeneutics” seems to acknowledge that a particular theological position or “doctrinal key”¹⁵ informs and shapes one’s reading of the Bible. While Biblical scholars, quite rightly, have been dismayed by the way the Bible has been used and abused in Systematic Theology (by reading support for various doctrine into Biblical texts), there has been an unhelpful tendency among some Biblical scholars to pretend that faith convictions (and Christian doctrines reflecting on such convictions) do not play a necessary and a crucial role in interpreting and appropriating Biblical texts.

Strictly speaking, though, the concept “hermeneutics” is best used in the sense of a theoretical reflection on and an analysis of the process of interpretation.¹⁶ Hermeneutics itself is not primarily an act of interpretation; it is a reflection on interpretation. To use an analogy: Biology is a reflection (logos) on life (bios); it is not primarily a form of life (although doing biology is of course also a very specific way of living).

The question is therefore whether proposals for an ecological hermeneutics have actually led to new methodological insights (i.e. at the level of hermeneutics) or whether this is simply a different way of reading the Bible (i.e. at the level of interpretation or interpretative keys)? Perhaps it is too early to provide a clear answer to this question since there have been relatively few contributions on the nature of an ecological hermeneutics and (except for the *Earth Bible* project), these have been rather diffuse.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the emergence of an ecological hermeneutics promises to be hermeneutically comprehensive. This implies that it touches on every aspect of the process of

14. Habel & Balabanski (2002:1).

15. I have discussed the notion of “doctrinal keys” elsewhere in more detail. See Conradie (2001) as well as the discussion below.

16. See chapter 3.2 of *Angling for interpretation*, an introductory work on biblical hermeneutics (Conradie and Jonker 2001).

17. See the contributions by Müller (1994 and Van den Brom (1997, 1998) in this regard.

interpretation. In earlier contributions, Louis Jonker and I have offered a conceptual “map” of the process of Biblical interpretation. This map builds on a communication model of interpretation. In its simplest form, the map includes the following three elements:

Source – Message – Receiver

or

Source – Production – Message – Reception – Receiver

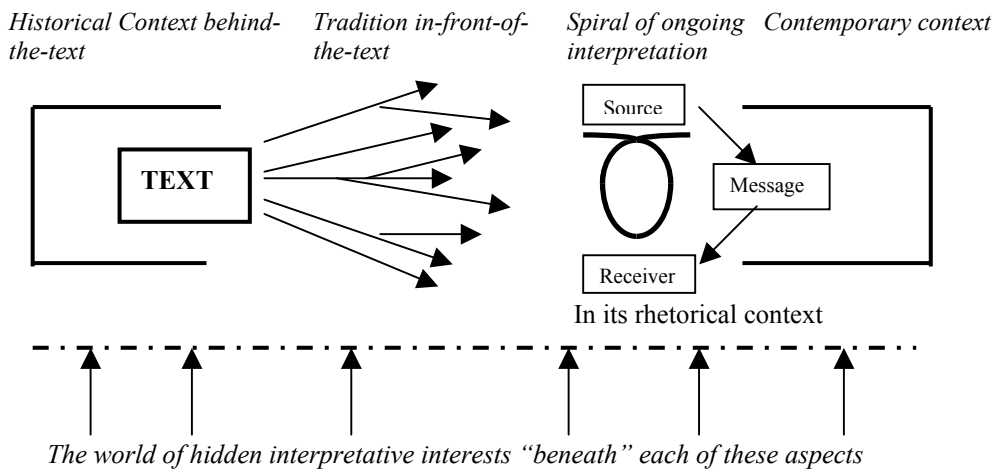
Interpretation focuses on the reception of the message and not so much on its production (what happens between a message and its source). In the case of the interpretation of texts, which includes the appropriation of such texts, the diagram can be simplified to focus on the text and the contemporary context within which it is interpreted. Therefore:



On this basis we identified the following main dimensions that are involved in the interpretation and appropriation of the Bible in a particular contemporary context:

- 1) The world-behind-the-text;
- 2) The world-of-the-text;
- 3) The world-in-front-of-the-text;
- 4) The act of interpretation and appropriation itself;
- 5) The rhetorical thrust of the act of interpretation and appropriation;
- 6) The contemporary context;
- 7) The world “below” interpretation.

A diagram that includes all seven these aspects may then look something like this:



On the basis of this conceptual map of Biblical interpretation, I would suggest that new insights, also methodological insights, have emerged from attempts to reread the Bible from an ecological perspective. This may be illustrated with the following examples (focusing mostly on the famous text on human “dominion” in Gen 1:27-29).

On the production of texts:

In his important work, *The Yahwist landscape: Nature and religion in early Israel*,¹⁸ Theodore Hiebert argued that Israel's nomadic desert origins and agricultural roots are reflected in the Yahwist motif of the desert oasis in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2). By contrast, the creation narrative of Genesis 1 assumes the threat of alluvial floods in Mesopotamia. It calls for order amidst the forces of chaos. Humans are to play a role in the establishment of such order (dominion). Hiebert's work illustrates that the production of a text has to be understood not only against its social and historical background. The impact of the material landscape on the production of texts should also be taken into account. The importance of geography and topography for demography has to be recognised.

On a literary analysis of texts:

Perhaps the most important contribution to literary analysis from an ecological perspective is the way in which Earth is recognised as a distinct voice that has been inscribed (and often marginalised) within the text. In literary terms, Earth (or more concretely waters, mountains, rivers, plants, trees, insects, birds and animals) should not simply be understood as a way of describing the narrative scene or context. Non-human creatures are actors that play an active role in history and that are influenced by human history. The Earth Bible project provides the most prominent example in this regard. The two contributions on Genesis 1:27-29 (from Norm Habel and Mark Brett) illustrate how the voice of Earth can be retrieved despite the legacy of human dominion.

On the history of reception of texts:

In his excellent book, *The travail of nature*,¹⁹ Paul Santmire analysed the "ambiguous ecological promise" of the Christian tradition. He counters both those critics who assume that the Christian tradition has little, if anything, to offer to ecological thinking, and those who are overly eager to redeem the tradition, e.g. through an all too uncritical retrieval of human dominion. He shows that the history of interpretation of texts such as Genesis 1:27-28 is characterised by radical plurality and the impact of pervasive ideologies.

On the role of the contemporary context:

Larry Rasmussen's acclaimed work, *Earth community Earth ethics*,²⁰ is one of the better theological assessments of the contemporary global context from an ecological perspective. The notion of "Earth community" has several connotations: a) it suggests that Earth is the common home for all religious traditions, b) it values the emphasis on community in the wisdom of indigenous cultures, c) it draws on the scientific rediscovery that interconnectedness structures galaxies, all forms of life, ecosystems and human societies, d) it responds to the threat of the fragmentation of local community life all over the world, e) it calls for the fostering of sustainable communities. If the Earth is our only home (*oikos*), the task of the steward (the *oikonomos*) is not one of domination but of responsible participation in the one community of life. This illustrates how an analysis of the contemporary context can shape the reinterpretation of a text such as Gen 1:27-28.

On the rhetorical context:

18. See Hiebert (1996, 2000).

19. Santmire (1985).

20. Rasmussen (1996).

Theological responses to environmental destruction reflect the confusing and conflicting diversity of contemporary Christian theologies. Subsequently, several scholars in the field have tried to identify the dominant types of ecological theology. In her book, *Gaia and God: Ecofeminist theology of Earth healing*,²¹ Catholic theologian Rosemary Ruether proposed that a covenantal tradition and a sacramental tradition of earthkeeping may be identified. The covenantal type is popular among Protestant Christians and draws inspiration from the Bible and the covenantal tradition to emphasise a commitment for right relationships within the earth community. The sacramental type draws on the Bible and on patristic and medieval mysticism to speak to the heart, to inspire a vision of the sacred and to express an ecstatic experience of communion within the earth community. Although Ruether argues that these two types of ecological theology can complement one another, it is clear that the rhetorical context (e.g. Protestant or Catholic) will influence one's selection of appropriate texts, doctrinal keys and forms of spirituality to express an ecological ethos. In a rhetorical context with a strong sense of covenantal responsibilities, a theology of stewardship may flourish while this may be less prominent in a context with strong sacramental sensibilities.

On the influence of pervasive ideologies:

The discussion of the "Earth Bible" project above provides an example of a sensitivity for pervasive ideologies (especially anthropocentrism) in the Biblical texts and in their subsequent history of interpretation. Another version of such a hermeneutic of suspicion is that of ecological feminism. Here, the interlocking dualisms of culture and nature and male/female are subjected to critique. It is argued that the same logic that legitimised patriarchal domination of men over women has been extrapolated toward the exploitation of nature in the name of (patriarchal) culture. These forms of domination in the name of difference are reflected in the Biblical texts. The assumed sacred authority of the Bible must therefore be questioned together with that of patriarchy.²²

On the spiral of interpretation:

How does interpretation actually take place? How do we manage to relate the message of the Bible with a particular context? Here the role played by doctrinal keys has to be emphasised. Doctrinal keys are comprehensive theological constructs that may be used to establish a relationship between the Biblical texts and a contemporary context. They play a crucial role in the identification of similarities (amidst differences) between the Biblical text and a contemporary context. They have a double function in this regard. They provide a key to unlock the meaning of *both* the contemporary context *and* the Biblical texts and simultaneously enable the interpreter to establish a *link* between text and contemporary context. Doctrinal keys are not only employed to *find* similarities but to *construct* similarities, to *make* things similar (*idem-facio*), if necessary. The scope of such interpretative keys is often quite comprehensive: They purport to provide a clue to the core meaning of the contemporary context *as a whole* and the Biblical text *as a whole*.

Such interpretative keys are usually derived from core Christian beliefs. The doctrinal key of "liberation" may serve as an example. The confession that "God is a Liberator" is used in liberation theology as a doctrinal key to link Biblical texts (stories on how God liberated people in the past) with particular contexts of oppression today. In this sense a

21. Ruether (1992).

22. See for example Eaton (2000).

new theology would indeed lead to a new form of hermeneutics because of the introduction of a different doctrinal key.

The controversial term “stewardship” illustrates the use of such doctrinal keys with reference to Genesis 1:27-28. The word stewardship does not appear in the text itself. Nevertheless, it has become a very common key to interpret the meaning of the Hebrew words *kabash* (“subdue”) and *radah* (“have dominion”). In his influential study, *The steward, a Biblical symbol come of age*,²³ Douglas John Hall develops a theology of stewardship that suggests that we human beings are responsible for the whole earth, that we are together responsible for the whole earth, that this responsibility includes the non-human as well as the human world, that this responsibility must seek to express itself in just and merciful political forms and that this responsibility must be exercised in the light not only of the immediate situation but of the near and distant future as well. It is clear that “stewardship” function here as a hermeneutical key to relate the Biblical text with ecological responsibility within the contemporary context.

The many criticisms that have been raised against such a notion of stewardship (e.g. that it is too hierarchical, too managerial, too androcentric and that it portrays God as either a patriarch or an absentee Landlord) suggest that all doctrinal keys have to be subjected to a hermeneutics of suspicion.²⁴ In his essay on Genesis 1:26-28, Habel adamantly concludes that the claim that the mandate in this passage has been misunderstood and that it can best be interpreted in terms of a benign stewardship model is untenable.²⁵

6. Conclusion

In the light of these comments on Christian doctrine it is pertinent that an ecological biblical hermeneutics should go hand in hand with an ecological reformulation of Christian doctrine. Such a critical reinvestigation of Christian doctrine cannot be narrowly focused on a reinterpretation of creation theology but calls for a review of all aspects of the Christian faith (the trinity, God as Father, creation, humanity, sin, providence, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, the church, the sacraments and Christian hope). In my view, there are especially four crucial areas where Christian piety has often inhibited an environmental ethos, spirituality and praxis, namely a worldless notion of God’s transcendence, a dualist anthropology, a personalist reduction of the cosmic scope of salvation and an escapist eschatology.²⁶ Any ecological theology will remain shallow unless an adequate response to these four problems can be provided.

The challenge that the Earth Bible team is putting to their colleagues in Systematic Theology is to tackle these doctrinal questions with a vigour, thoroughness and imagination that is comparable to that of the Earth Bible series. This challenge was recognised in the planning stages of the Earth Bible project. Together with the Earth Bible project, a Contextual Ecotheology project was launched under the leadership of Denis Edwards. This project, which is perhaps less well-known than the Earth Bible project, was also located at the Centre for Theology, Science and Culture (Adelaide College of Divinity and Flinders, University of South Australia). It has led to the publication of a volume of essays entitled *Earth revealing – Earth healing: Ecology and Christian theology* (2001). This attractive and well-crafted publication is edited by Denis Edwards and published by The Liturgical

23. Hall (1990).

24. See Conradie (1999) for a more detailed critical discussion of the notion of stewardship.

25. Habel (2000:31).

26. See my attempt (Conradie 2000) to address these issues from a point of departure in the notion of “hope for the earth”.

Press. It contains a number of excellent essays on various aspects of Christian doctrine, including the trinity, God's transcendence, Christology, pneumatology, anthropology and eschatology.

There are, of course, many similar publications that investigate specific aspects of Christian doctrine. The major (720 pages!) volume entitled *Christianity and ecology: Seeking the well-being of earth and humans*, edited by Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Harvard University Press, 2000) also includes a number of essays on Christian doctrine. Nevertheless, far more work needs to be done in order to explore every aspect of Christian doctrine from an ecological perspective in a full-length study. Such work has to be done from within and in critical conversation with each of the major theological traditions. The completion of the Earth Bible project challenges and encourages those of us working in Systematic Theology to do precisely that. It also poses a crucial question for contemporary ecological theology: Can the Biblical tradition be "colonised" for ecotheology without a prior and critical examination of its rather diverse ecological orientations.²⁷

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27. See Habel & Balabanski (2002:12).

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