

Fall 2016

## Guiding Ecojustice Principles

Norman Habel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

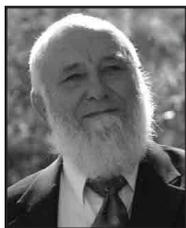
---

### Recommended Citation

Habel, N. (2016). Guiding Ecojustice Principles. *Spiritan Horizons*, 11 (11). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol11/iss11/14>

This Soundings is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Horizons by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

## GUIDING ECOJUSTICE PRINCIPLES<sup>1</sup>



### Dr. Norman C. Habel

Dr. Norman Habel was Professor of Biblical Studies in the USA from 1960-1973. He returned to Australia in 1974 and established the first Religion Studies Department there. From 1984-87 he was Principal of Kodaikanal International School in South India and established a school and community health program for oppressed tribal and Dalit women in the remote hills. His research includes a *Commentary on Job* in the OT Library series. 1985, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 2008 (coeditor); *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?* 2012; and *Rainbow of Mysteries: Meeting the Sacred in Nature*, 2012. He spearheads the five volume international project, *The Earth Bible*, reading the Bible from the perspective of justice for Earth. A sequel is the *Earth Bible Commentary* series, volume 1, *An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1—11*, 2011 being by him.

### Introduction

The principles enunciated in this chapter are the basic understandings about ecojustice that are shared by those who have developed the Earth Bible series. This set of principles has been developed over several years in dialogue with ecologists and their writings, some of whom, like Thomas Berry, have developed their own distinctive sets of ecological principles (Berry 1988). The principles formulated here have been refined in consultations and workshops concerned with both ecology in general and the relationship between ecology and theology or the Bible.

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

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

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

## Suspicion, Retrieval and Dualism

*...we can expect  
biblical texts to be  
anthropocentric.*

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

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

*...detecting features  
of the text to retrieve  
traditions about  
the Earth or Earth  
community that  
have been unnoticed,  
suppressed or hidden.*

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

There is a strong possibility that biblical texts may be more sympathetic to the plight and potential of the Earth than our previous interpretations have allowed, even if the ecological questions we are posing arise out of a contemporary Earth consciousness. This is suggested by the very title of Gene Tucker's presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1996: "Rain on a Land Where No One Lives." (1997:3). Some texts may even celebrate the Earth in a way that our contemporary anthropocentric eyes have not detected or have regarded as the quaint language of ancient poetry. Is it 'only poetry' when the Psalmist asserts that "the heavens/skies are telling the glory of El" (Ps 19:1)? The verses that follow speak of a genuine message coming from parts of creation in a form that is other than human "words." (Ps 19:1-4).

*...possibility that there are suppressed Earth traditions that resist the dominant patriarchal anthropocentric orientation of the text.*

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

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

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

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

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

These dualistic pairs are deliberately listed here as background for the discussion which follows in connection with the six principles, each of which articulates an ecological view of reality which challenges at least one of these traditional pairings. It is immediately apparent from these pairings that

the realities associated with the human pole of the pairing are understood to be superior in some way to the nature pole of the pairing. These dualisms necessarily devalue the earth as belonging to the weak side of the pairings. Do these pairings reflect genuine dualisms in the ancient biblical text, or are they complementary opposites within the structure of the cosmos, or are they discerned there because of the dualistic vision of Western readers?

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

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

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

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

*We are obliged to make a conscious paradigm shift if we are to view the world in terms of complementary opposites...*

*To regard Earth as "she" as a matter of course is to impose the language of social domination on a part of our physical world.*

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

*...to recognize our kinship with all members of the Earth community and to assume a posture of empathy and partnership with the Earth, rather than assume dominion over Earth...*

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

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

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

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

Given the history of Western thought, we may assume that biblical interpreters have read the text in terms of the dualities dominant in their society. In this context heaven is viewed as spiritual, superior, pure and eternal. The Earth is correspondingly viewed as material, inferior, corrupt and transitory. We may suspect, at the outset, that the biblical materials reflect a similar dualism, especially if we have imbibed the spirituality of hymns based on the Book of Hebrews where heaven is apparently depicted as our true

home and Earth as a motel for passing pilgrims (Heb. 11.13-16). In such hymns this earthly domain is “very evil,” a place where “exiles mourn,” while heaven is a “sweet and blessed country,” an endless “land of rest.” (*Lutheran Hymnal*, 1941, # 605).

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

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

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

In many interpretations, the Earth is understood to be valued or “good” precisely because God has invested the Earth with value. The expression “and God saw that X was good” in Genesis 1 is often viewed as a formula of divine pronouncement or approbation. This literary critical language is misleading. It is preferable to speak of an event, a divine reaction. When God sees the light (v. 4) or the Earth emerge from the waters (v.10), God reacts to what God sees,

*The Earth and the components of the Earth in Genesis 1 are valued as “good” by God when God discovers them to be so, not because God pronounces them to be so.*

*“Every molecule of oxygen in the planet comes from plants. All the oxygen is completely recycled by living organisms every two thousand years” (1993:18). We breathe today the same air once breathed once recycled by the cedars of Lebanon.*

and what God sees is good. The Earth and the components of the Earth in Genesis 1 are valued as “good” by God when God discovers them to be so, not because God pronounces them to be so. In Genesis 1, the Earth is “good” of itself. Are there other biblical passages where the same affirmation of Earth can be retrieved?

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

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

One of the most sobering and significant outcomes of the ecological movement is a growing awareness that the Earth is not a controlled or mechanical structure consisting of independent parts governed by the so-called laws of nature. Each species and each member of each species are connected by complex webs of interrelationships. Humans, too, are dependent on the fields, the forests, the trees, the air and the wide diversity of life that inhabits these domains. Humans are an integral part of what has come to be called the “Earth community”; humans are Earth-bound. All breathing creatures inhale the same air. According to Birch, “Every molecule of oxygen in the planet comes from plants. All the oxygen is completely recycled by living organisms every two thousand years” (1993:18). We breathe today the same air once breathed once recycled by the cedars of Lebanon.

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

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

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

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

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

*Nature’s processes have produced us, we are constituted by our inheritance from its past and we live in the ambience of its created balances today.*

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

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

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

*Deep ecologists  
argue that the Earth  
functions more like a  
living organism than  
a machine governed  
by rigid laws.*

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

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

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

The history of biblical interpretation has, by and large, tended to justify this dualism. When we approach a given text we may suspect that the language of the text gives rise to this kind of differentiation between “voiced” humans and the presumed “voiceless” members of the wider Earth community. Given this dualistic mindset, passages referring to “the works” of God’s creation blessing or praising God (as in Ps 103:22), have been easily dismissed as poetic license. But do these texts reflect more than poetry? Do they reflect a common bond between humans and non-humans as

worshippers before God?

We may, however, look afresh at the text and ask whether the voice of the earth and the members of the earth community can be heard in many passages in a way that views them as subjects with their own languages, non-human voices and capacity for worship. Or we may ask whether the voice of the Earth has been suppressed because it is a threat to the authority of anthropocentric writers?

How then can we know the voice of the Earth? How can the voices of other species and entities on Earth be heard?

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

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

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

As we read the storytellers, prophets and poets of the Scriptures we ask whether they are mediating the voice of the Earth or members of the Earth community, or whether in fact they are suppressing those voices as they strive to hear the voice of God? Is Jeremiah, who hears the land mourning typical (Jer 12:4, 11)? Is Job simply being rhetorical when he asserts, "Ask the animals and they will teach you" (Job 12:7)? Or are most biblical writers happy to announce curses, brought about by humans, on the ground, trees, animal life, or rivers without any sense

*...we may ask whether  
the voice of the Earth  
has been suppressed...*

of the anguish felt by the Earth? We are invited in this hermeneutical process to stand with the Earth to retrieve the silenced voices of the Earth. This is the task undertaken by Shirley Wurst in her analysis of the curse on the Earth (Gen 3:14-19) in Volume 2 of this series.

#### 4. The Principle of Purpose

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

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

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

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

*Whether one views these patterns as being developed by an evolutionary impulse, an immanent energy, a living Spirit or a Creator God, the reality remains that all the pieces of these ecosystems form a design and reflect a direction.*

*...the direction is to sustain life in all its biodiversity and beauty.*

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

This eschatological dualism emphasized heaven as eternal and glorious, an endless linear mode of existence, without the life cycles and ecosystems that are typical of earth. In the past, many have read the Bible from this dualistic perspective. Is this the orientation of biblical passages about the design, purpose and future of Earth? Is the idea that the destruction of the elements by fire in 2 Peter 3:10 the dominant orientation of the New Testament? When we view the text from the perspective of the Earth, however, is the death of Earth considered inevitable and, if so, is that death part of a natural cycle of birth, death and renewal? This question is tackled by Duncan Reid in his article on Revelation 21.

*When we view the text from the perspective of the Earth, however, is the death of Earth considered inevitable and, if so, is that death part of a natural cycle of birth, death and renewal?*

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

## **5. The Principle of [Mutual<sup>2</sup>] Custodianship**

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

This principle is designed to reflect the role of human beings in the Earth community. Understandably, there is a widespread recognition today that the language of human dominion over the Earth is not acceptable but is, in fact, one of the factors that has led to the ecological crisis. A considerable

*...that the language of human dominion over the Earth is not acceptable but is, in fact, one of the factors that has led to the ecological crisis.*

mass of literature has arisen advocating the concept of humans exercising responsible stewardship over the Earth. According to this model, the *'oikos* (household) of the Earth has been entrusted to humans by God, the owner of the house. The fact that humans have been unfaithful stewards in the past does not nullify the usefulness of the model.

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

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

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

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

Given the force of this model in the history of interpretation, we may suspect that biblical texts and their interpreters represent humans as stewards ruling on behalf of God, but nevertheless

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

ruling. These readings reflect a dualism which reflects the traditional humanity/nature antagonism. Humans are creatures of a different order from the rest of creation and destined by God to rule over the Earth community for God.

An alternative ecological model views humans as a species which is an integral part of the Earth community, inevitably interconnected with other species and ecosystems, and dependent upon these systems for survival. Humans, therefore, have a natural kinship with other living beings on Earth, a kinship that reaches beyond pure biological dependency (see Hefner quoted above). Many indigenous peoples testify to this sense of kinship in their culture. George Tinker describes a ritual among his people where the community is assembled in a circle.

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

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

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

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

*We may well suspect that a given text is likely to focus on sins against God and wrongs against other humans, but ignore the injustices committed against the Earth, because the Earth is viewed as a passive object without feeling or voice.*

## **6. Principle of Resistance**

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

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

Those who belong to such groups and those who dare to identify with them and espouse their cause recognize that oppressed groups have numerous means of resistance to survive their lot. There are powerful resistance stories in the Scriptures including the account of the Gibeonites who tricked Joshua (Joshua 9) and the record of the midwives who defied Pharaoh (Exod 2:15-22). Are there explicit or oppressed resistance stories that relate to the Earth or non-human members of the Earth community? Is the Earth constructed by anthropocentric writers into a passive victim? Or are there Earth voices in the text resisting victim construction?

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

If we assume a posture of empathy with the wider Earth community, can we ignore the way the Earth seems to suffer unjustly because of what humans do? The curses of the covenant in texts like Deuteronomy 28 involve numerous domains of the Earth that have played no part in the human sin against God. When the sky turns to bronze and the earth to iron (Deut 28:23) the people may indeed suffer. But does the Earth not suffer too? Is not this suffering unjust? Do these

texts portray a deity who simply “uses” the earth to punish humans (cf. Amos 4:7-9)? Or is this a form of corporate suffering where the Earth suffers in sympathy with humans?

*Is the groaning of creation in Romans 8 also part of the resistance of the earth to the injustices to which it has been subjected?*

Suggestions that the Earth or Earth community are not insensitive to these injustices can be found in prophets like Jeremiah who hears the land mourning because Israel’s sin has made the land desolate (Jer 12:4, 7-11; cf. Hosea 4:1-3). God too seems to suffer in sympathy with the land, a concern Terence Fretheim tackles in his article on Jeremiah 12 in this volume. Is the groaning of creation in Romans 8 also part of the resistance of the earth to the injustices to which it has been subjected? Brendan Byrne’s discussion of Romans 8:18-25 seeks to come to terms with this question. Is there more than poetic imagery in the assertion that the land will “vomit out” those inhabitants who defile the land? (Lev 18:24-30)

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

### **Permissions**

© Norman C. Habel, “Guiding Ecojustice Principles,” *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*. The Earth Bible 1. Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2000, 38-53.

### **References:**

Berry, Thomas 1988

*The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.

Birch, Charles 1993

*Confronting the Future*. Melbourne: Penguin.

Dryness, William 1990

“Stewardship of the Earth in the Old Testament,” in *Tending the Garden. Essays on the Gospel and the Earth*. Edited by Wesley Granberg-Michaelson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Duroux, Mary 1992

*Dirge for Hidden Art*. Morinya: Heritage Publishing.

Edwards, Denis 1998

“Theological Foundations for Ecological Praxis’ *Ecotology* 5 & 6, July 1998/Jan 1999, pp. 126-141.

Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schussler 1985

“The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing our Critical Work,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. Edited by Letty Russell. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Habel, Norman 1998

“Stewardship, Partnership and Kinship I,” in *LWF Studies: A Just Asia*. Geneva: Lutheran World Federation.

Hall Douglas 1990

*The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Hefner, Philip 1995

“Beyond Exploitation and Sentimentality: Challenges to a Theology of Nature,” *Tro & Tanke*, 5, pp. 119-142

*The Lutheran Hymnal* 1941

St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

Manes, Christopher 1996

“Nature and Silence’ in *The Ecocriticism Reader, Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

McDaniel, Jay 1994

*With Roots and Wings*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

Palmer, Clare 1992

“Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics,”  
in *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology*.  
Edited by Ian Ball et al. London: SPCK.

Ponting, Clive 1991

*A Green History of the World. The Environment and the  
Collapse of Great Civilisations*. London: Penguin.

Ruether, Rosemary 1989

“Toward an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature,”  
in *Healing the Wounds*. Edited by Judith Plant. Philadelphia:  
New Society.

Tinker, George 1992

“Creation as Kin: An American Indian View,” *After  
Nature’s Revolt. Ecojustice and Theology*. Edited by Dieter  
Hessel. Minneapolis: Fortress.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Reproduced with the permission of Bloomsbury  
Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

<sup>2</sup>“Mutual” is added from later elaborations of these  
principles, for example, Norman Habel and Peter  
Trudinger, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta:  
Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 2 [Editor]