

## Challenges in the Search for an Ecotheology

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### **ABSTRACT**

*It is the purpose of this article to expose the reasons why ecological issues previously played such an insignificant role in biblical theology and thereby introduce some burning questions which need to be discussed in future by ecotheologians. The Bible is often accused of being hostile or indifferent toward the environment. The main focal points for these accusations were: the idea expressed in Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 8 that humans should subdue the earth and rule over it, an anthropocentric viewpoint, changes in social structure brought about by patriarchal monotheism, the negative evaluation of the wilderness concept and the problematic land promises in the Pentateuch. The absence of a biblical concept of nature and the lack of attention given to the earth in wisdom literature were further identified as reasons why the Bible may seem indifferent to the earth. For various other philosophical and theological reasons, nature and the environment have not featured prominently (if at all) in biblical theology. Various urgent questions are posed to ecotheologians in conclusion.*

### **A THE MOSCOW CHALLENGE**

At the 1990 *Moscow Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders Conference* thirty-two eminent scientists<sup>1</sup> and two hundred and seventy-one spiritual leaders<sup>2</sup> challenged religious communities and scientists to join hands in fighting for the preservation of the environment. In an open letter they expressed their concern about the depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, the obliteration of forests, the rapid extinction of species and the possibility of nuclear war (Moscow Conference 1990).

The letter further stated that

problems of such magnitude, and solutions demanding so broad a perspective, must be recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension.

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<sup>1</sup> These scientists included a number of Nobel laureates and well-known scientists such as Carl Sagan (astronomer), E.O. Wilson (biologist) and Stephan Jay Gould (biologist).

<sup>2</sup> The religious leaders represented 83 countries and most major religions.

In the light of this they (Moscow Conference 1990) urged religious communities to become a strong force in influencing public and private opinion and behaviour and said that:

The historical record makes clear that religious teaching, example and leadership are able to influence personal conduct and commitment powerfully.

One may rightly ask why it became necessary to mobilise religious institutions with regard to environmental issues. Surely environmental and conservation issues have always been central to religious teaching. More specifically, how prominent was and is the environment on the agenda of Christian theology? The answer to this question would unfortunately be disappointing to most conservation-minded people. Up to the 1980s, environmental and conservation issues were almost totally absent from Christian theology and worship. Even worse, in some cases the Christian Bible and theology were specifically blamed for the ecological crisis (White 1967: 1203-1207; Leopold 1970).

Fortunately during the past thirty years, and especially since the Moscow challenge, some Christian theologians and congregations have cultivated a new appreciation for 'green' matters. For example, in Australia Norman Habel launched the Earth Bible project in 2000 and since then a total of five volumes has been published in this series.<sup>3</sup> Earlier a whole 'cottage industry' – as Gene Tucker (1997:3) called it – developed among theologians in an attempt to defend Christianity against perceptions that it was either indifferent or hostile towards nature and to develop a new appreciation for nature within theology.<sup>4</sup>

The companion to this new theological interest in the environment was the blooming of 'green ministries' in many congregations and the fact that environmental issues became part of the regular church calendar in some cases.<sup>5</sup> One nonetheless has to agree with Creegan (2004:32) that the process of retelling the biblical story in terms of environmental issues has only just begun. The bulk of the work still has to be done and much of what has been done cannot be regarded as more than tentative initial explorations – often burdened by major flaws in approach, both in terms of theology and science.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Habel (2000a); Habel & Wurst (2000); Habel (2001a); Habel & Wurst (2001); and Habel & Balabanski (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e. g. Barr (1974); Steck (1978); Anderson (1984; 1994); Buber (1970); Brueggemann (1977); Moltmann (1985); Clifford & Collins (1992); Tucker (1993); Limburg (1994); Simkins (1994); Fretheim (1996); and Hiebert (1996).

<sup>5</sup> For example, in the liturgy of Holy Communion the New Zealand prayer book now includes the following prayer: '*Renew in us a sense of wonder for the earth and all that is in it*' (Creegan 2004:30).

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In the South African context green issues have received limited attention, especially from biblical and Old Testament scholars.<sup>6</sup> The aim of this article is to stimulate the ecotheological debate among Old Testament scholars in South Africa by exploring possible reasons for the lack of interest in ecological issues among theologians in the past. The purpose is twofold: a) to challenge South African Old Testament scholars to review their own theological premises; and b) to set the stage for an in-depth and critical debate about first attempts to establish a respectable ecotheology. Of special concern to the present author are some *ad hoc* and doubtful theological and scientific views taken by some ecotheologians. Are ecotheologians not sometimes so keen to establish a biblical foundation for ecological stewardship that they pay scant attention to their theological and scientific assumptions?<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately the limited scope of this article will allow only a preliminary ‘setting of the stage’ for the debate, while a critical theological and scientific evaluation and suggestions for possible new avenues for theological research will have to wait for future discussion. Some initial critical remarks will, however, be suggested while putting all the burning questions on the table.

## **B IN SEARCH OF A CULPRIT**

Scholars have contributed the origin of our current ecological crisis to various possible sources. What has been assumed by most scholars is that the crisis was not merely caused by an ‘innocent’ or mindless process whereby humanity gradually outstripped its resources. Especially within the humanities, a search was conducted into the possible ‘ideological’ reasons that allowed or legitimised such a process.

In this search for possible culprits it is not surprising that a wide array of ‘ideologies’ came to be blamed for facilitating the ecological crisis. These included the Bible, Christian theology, the Reformation, Greek philosophy, the industrial revolution, colonialism and many others (cf. Habel 2000b:30). What will interest us here is more specifically how all the above may have influenced theological interpretation, or alternatively how certain theological arguments may have been used to support or legitimise processes such as the industrial revolution or colonialism.

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<sup>6</sup> Some exceptions are Loader (1987); Van Heerden (2005); Coetzee (2006 and 2008).

<sup>7</sup> For example, have ecotheologians considered the possible pagan undertones of nature mysticism (Creegan 2004:33) or when advocating the Gaia hypothesis (Dyrness 1992:264-278)? An equally disconcerting tendency is that many ecotheologians speak about the balance of and the design in nature without any appreciation of how problematic these terms are to biologists (cf. Van Dyk 2001:150-170).

In the process of looking for a culprit, the Judaeo-Christian religion soon became a prime target. In the 1960s the historian Lynn White (1967:1205) stated the following:

What people do about ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion.

In the light of White's statement, Tucker (1997:4) added the following:

Thus, it is important for biblical scholars to take up the question of the biblical understanding of the environment. There is sufficient evidence – from the history of Western thought and from contemporary discourse on the environment – to show that the interpretation of the Bible is significant.

When considering the potential role Christian thought may have played in causing the ecological crisis, we will make a distinction between (a) 'what the Bible itself says' and (b) how the biblical text was interpreted by theologians. Although a too sharp distinction between the Bible and its interpretation is untenable, such a distinction can be useful when it acknowledges that the Bible does not 'speak for itself': The popular misconception that the reader of the Bible can have direct access to the biblical text, without any form of intervening interpretation, is a common modernistic myth (cf. Brueggemann 1993:8-10).<sup>8</sup> Biblical interpretation should be seen as a process of gradually widening both the literary and historical contexts of the text. It therefore moves from reading the text first within its immediate context and then increasingly interpreting it against its wider literary and historical horizon. In a sense the process can be compared with throwing a pebble into a pond and watching the ripples on the surface circling outwards. Initially the circles are small and not influenced by anything but the original pebble. This can be compared with the immediate context of a text. However, as the ripples circle outwards their form and direction are influenced by other waves, by objects in the pond (e. g. rocks) and eventually by the form of the shoreline. These latter influences can be compared with the wider context of the text.

In agreement with the above metaphor we will call the text, as viewed from within its immediate context, 'what the Bible says', while the text, as profiled against its wider contexts will be termed 'the interpretation of the text.' When considering first what the biblical text says about the environment, we

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<sup>8</sup> The naïve concept that biblical texts speak for themselves (without the intervention of interpretation) was convincingly shattered by postmodernism and reader-response approaches. Although I do not agree with some post-structuralists that **all** meaning is located in the reader, it is important to realise that meaning is a product of the reader [...] rooted in the possibilities of the text (Eaton 2000:60).

will explore two common accusations made against the Bible: (a) that the Bible is hostile towards the environment, or (b) that the Bible is indifferent towards the environment.

## C IS THE BIBLE HOSTILE TOWARD THE ENVIRONMENT?

As mentioned earlier, Lynn White (1967) and Quinn (1996; 1998) made serious allegations that the Bible was complicit in enabling the ecological crisis. Some scholars have also acknowledged that the negative perception of the wilderness in the Old Testament and the promises of land may have contributed towards a negative evaluation of nature (Leal 2004:65-96). We will first deal with the accusation that Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 8 advocate the idea of human dominance over nature which, in turn, leads to the possibility of exploiting nature.

### 1 Human domination over the earth

According to White (1967) the ecological crisis could not be solved by simply applying more science and technology to the problem, but only by recognising that our science has grown out of Christian attitudes toward humankind's relation to nature. According to him the main 'offending' text in the Bible is Genesis 1:28, which states that man was created and instructed by God to 'subdue' and 'rule over' the natural world. Although many theologians (e. g. Loader 1987:9 and Tucker 1997:5) tried to shift the 'blame' away from the Genesis text by saying that an alternative more positive reading of this verse was possible, it is important to first carefully consider what the Genesis text says within its immediate context.<sup>9</sup>

Genesis 1:28 can be translated as follows:

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.' (*NIV*, emphasis mine - PvD)

When reading the verse, the first inclination of the ecologically sensitive reader is to try and interpret the words 'subdue' and 'rule over' in a less damaging way (cf. Tucker 1997:7). However, within its immediate context the Hebrew words '*kbš*' (subdue/repress) and '*rdh*' (rule/tread on) cannot be softened in any way. Even Tucker (1997:7) acknowledged that the term 'subdue' is a potentially violent verb, referring to 'trampling under one's feet' in absolute subjugation. The same word is used in Joel 4:13 for treading a winepress (Koehler & Baumgartner 1958:875). Humans were created as God's representatives and rulers over the earth with the purpose of dominating and cultivating

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to deny the very real danger that a totally inappropriate reading of a text can result from reading it only within its immediate context, cf. Van Dyk (1987).

it. This idea of dominance over the animals is further strengthened by the Yahwist's creation narrative, which states in Genesis 2:19 that all the animals were brought to man so that he could name them. To 'name' or to know the name of a person or animal in the Ancient Near East implied that you also had control or power over them (Von Rad 1966:83).

Linked to the above 'dominion' idea, is the anthropocentric perspective of both the P and J creation narratives. In Genesis 1 humans are portrayed as the last living creatures to be created, that is, as the climax of creation, while in Genesis 2-3 man was considered so important that he was created first (Van Dyk 2001:89; 109). One of the main narrative lines of tension in the Yahwist's creation narrative is the search for a companion for man – to alleviate his loneliness and to be his help (Genesis 2:18-20). In Genesis 2:21-24 woman is then created, which causes the 'liquidation' of this line of tension (cf. Propp 1968:89). The fact that animals could not alleviate man's loneliness creates a distance between humans and animals – a distance that further strengthens the anthropocentric perspective of the narrative.

I think it is only honest to admit that the Genesis creation narratives, and specifically Genesis 1:28, imply, within their immediate contexts, that humans are considered absolute rulers over the earth with potentially despotic power over nature. There is also no denying that in the creation narratives a definite anthropocentric view is taken when humans are describe as the rulers over the earth, created in God's image and acting as God's representatives. Earth was created to support human life, and its plants and animals were given to humans as food and for general usage – humans have the *right* to use the earth.

Lynn White was therefore right in his assessment that the Genesis creation narratives do advocate a view of human dominance over the earth, at least when viewed within their *immediate* contexts.

Another biblical text which expresses human domination over the earth in similar terms is Psalm 8:6-8:

You have given them [humans] dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

the birds of the air, and the fish of the seas, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. (*NRSV*)

The Hebrew word '*mšl*' (dominion) is the same that is used in other contexts of kings ruling over their subjects, while the expression '*put ... under their feet*' has the meaning of 'vigorous conquest by a superior force'. The image of a conquering king striking down his enemies (e. g. Ps 18:38) is invoked here (Carley 2000:119). It should also be noted that human dominion is

not only over all living animals (both domestic and wild), but over everything which God made, that is the whole cosmos (Carley 2000:120). It can therefore not be denied that Psalm 8 strengthens the idea that humans have the power to act as repressive forces within nature – and the Psalm seems to *celebrate* this power and glory of humans.

However, the question remains open: what happens when one takes the wider context of the creation narratives and Psalm 8 into account? That is, look at how the ‘ripples’ caused by the texts are influenced and adapted by their environment or wider context? How should one then interpret the idea that humans should ‘subdue’ and ‘rule over’ the earth? Can it then still be understood as limitless despotic power to use and abuse by humans at will? It was chiefly as a reaction to this question that many theologians proposed the idea of responsible stewardship as an alternative tradition within the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 Patriarchal monotheism

A second angle on blaming the Bible for the ecological crisis came from the resurgence of neopaganism (Creegan 2004:31). The argument is based on a view expressed earlier by Diamond (1986:19-20) that everything started going wrong with the environment when humanity changed their mode of existence from being hunters-gatherers to becoming agriculturists. According to him, it was this socio-economic shift, more than anything else, which spelled the beginning of the end for the health of the earth.

The popular novelist, Daniel Quinn (1996; 1998), further built on Diamond’s idea. He advocated the idea that when tribalism and its associated animistic religion was replaced six thousand years ago by patriarchal monotheism, it had a detrimental effect on the environment (Creegan 2004:31-32). It was, however, not merely the socio-economic development into agricultural communities that caused the ecological crisis, but its legitimisation by patriarchal monotheistic religion (e. g. the Judaeo-Christian faith) which allowed it to come about in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

This criticism that the Bible may explicitly or implicitly legitimise an environmentally damaging socio-economic structure for society, raises similar questions with regard to other institutions such as slavery, patriarchal dominance and capitalism. Does the Bible support these unacceptable institutions?

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Moltmann (1985); Loader (1987); Tucker (1997:4) and Creegan (2004:32). However, Harrison (1999:89) made the point that it was specifically a misplaced sense of stewardship which caused exploitation of nature. Ecotheologians should therefore appreciate that the concept of stewardship is not without its problems.

<sup>11</sup> Also see in Section D below and White’s view that Christianity lost its sense of the sacred.

### 3 The negative concept of wilderness

Since the Romantic movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the wilderness concept played an important role in the appreciation of nature and the environment. Exactly what can be termed wilderness and how it can be preserved, became major discussion points in the emerging ecological debate. But the Bible does not necessarily share this positive view of the wilderness (i. e. wild places). Tucker (1997:10) summarised it as follows:

Not only the Yahwist but throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the desert is dreadful and dangerous, a wasteland [. . .]. But ‘desert’ and ‘wilderness’ are virtually ideological categories that refer to what lies beyond the cultured . . . .

To the Yahwistic author of the Pentateuch, with his emphasis on cultivated land, the wilderness appeared as something hostile, something that only becomes worthwhile for humans once it could be irrigated and cultivated (Tucker 1997:9-10).

Notwithstanding a laudable attempt by Robert Leal (2004) to put a positive spin on the concept of wilderness in the Bible, serious doubts remain. Leal (2004) identified the following four basic attitudes towards the wilderness in the Bible:

- Negative – fear, repulsion and hostility.
- A place of significant encounters, for example, the Israelites wandering around in the wilderness for forty years, where they have significant religious and other experiences at Sinai, et cetera.
- A site of God’s grace – where people are purified and transformed.
- A place which also illustrates God’s good creation and which need to be treated with awe and respect.

One can rightly ask (in a somewhat cynical fashion), if the above four points cannot equally well apply to the Roman Catholic concept of purgatory? One should not forget that Israel’s wandering in the wilderness was basically perceived as punishment, not withstanding its positive outcome.

The negative biblical connotation of the wilderness is further supported by the idea that the ground was cursed by God in Genesis 3:17 after the fall of the first humans. This explained the ‘hostile nature’ of the soil and the fact that humans had henceforth put much toil into winning an existence from nature (Harrison 1999:105-106). It implied that nature was viewed in a very negative light as being cursed and that the relationship between humans and nature became ambiguous after the fall (Tucker 1997:9).

The fact that the wilderness was perceived in a negative light by Western society up to the Romantic Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century further argues



that a positive evaluation of the wilderness is a modern phenomenon and could not be expected to occur in the Bible. It may therefore be better for theologians to rather avoid the concept of wilderness and accept that the biblical concept had no resemblance to our modern positive perception of nature.<sup>12</sup>

The generally negative view of the Bible with regard to the wilderness is further underlined by the tension between humans and wild animals, which is implied by many texts of the Bible. For example, in Genesis 9:2-3 the fear and dread for humans are put on all wild animals and they are given to humans as a source of food – changing humans into predators. In Leviticus 26:6 God promises to remove all dangerous animals from the land, while in 1 Samuel 17:34-35 David boasts about killing bear and lion and in 2 Samuel 23:20 the warrior who kills a lion or bear is praised. In various other texts wild animals not only symbolise strength, courage and freedom, but also danger and destruction (Tucker 1997:11).

Jobling and Loewen (2000:81) expressed similar concerns about the negative and violent perceptions of nature expressed in the book of Amos:

Most dominant is an ecology of danger: a sense that nature is an unpredictable source of peril for humanity. Many violent natural images help build a picture of imminent destruction and death. The text serves up lions roaring, bears attacking, snakes biting, earth quakes, consuming fire, dismembered sheep, swarming locusts and sweeping disease.

According to them (Jobling & Loewen 2000:81) an opposite, but equally damaging metaphor in the book of Amos is the so-called ‘Edenic’ ecology of nature’s boundless plenty (Amos 9:13-15). This could easily be perceived as license to exploit the earth, because the earth is supposed to have limitless resources and the capacity to ‘bounce back’.

#### **4 The promise of land**

One of the dominant themes in the Pentateuch is the promise of land to the patriarchs (Gen 12:7; 13:14-18). The promise to Abraham of land could be interpreted as promoting the idea that land is a commodity belonging to humans (Hiers 1984:54). Leopold (1970:204-205) called this idea the ‘Abrahamic concept of land’ and described its implications as follows: ‘Abraham knew exactly what the land was for; it was to drip milk and honey into Abraham’s mouth.’

Like other biblical traditions the concept of land cannot be interpreted in isolation, but the possibility that it may have been interpreted in such an eco-

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<sup>12</sup> It is unfortunately a growing problem in ecotheology (and in some feminist circles) to fall into the trap of uncritically transferring the meaning of a word in one culture to that of another, or when it is assumed that all usages of the same word necessarily shares the same ‘basic meaning’.

gically damaging way by past biblical readers calls for a proper theological response.

## **D IS THE BIBLE INDIFFERENT TO THE ENVIRONMENT?**

An equally damaging accusation against the Bible is that it is indifferent towards the environment, or that environmental ethics are largely absent from the Bible. The associated implication is that environmental issues can never become more than a mere afterthought to biblical theology. This view seems to be held by many ‘mainline’ theologians, who are at best silent about ecological matters and at worst dismissive about the new so-called ecotheology.<sup>13</sup>

The first problem posed to biblical scholars is that neither the term ‘nature,’ nor the term ‘culture’ is a biblical concept (Tucker 1997:6). To ask what the Bible says about nature thereby becomes a difficult question to answer directly. Environmental degradation was probably not a major issue in biblical times due to the fact that, even though population densities increased significantly with the switch to an agricultural mode of existence, the density remained nonetheless so small that it never caused more than a local crisis.<sup>14</sup> That such a local crisis would become the object of theological reflection was unlikely, because it could be solved by merely relocating to a place of more natural abundance, by raiding your neighbour’s resources or through trade. It was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that the ecological crisis was first recognised<sup>15</sup> as a potential problem. Only since the 1960s it was perceived as a problem of global proportions. It was then that ecology first became part of the theological debate.

Initially it was hoped that the wisdom literature in the Old Testament may be a good source for biblical environmental ethics. Old Testament wisdom deals primarily with the place of human beings in the natural order, or how they should fit into the order of creation (Zimmerli 1964:148; Tucker 1997:6).

However, to the biblical scholar in search of ‘environmentally friendly’ texts, Old Testament wisdom literature proved to be a disappointment. For example, Proverbs 10-24 seldom allude to creation. The proverbs are anthropocentric in the sense that they focus entirely on the needs and aspirations of hu-

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<sup>13</sup> The scarcity of articles with an ecological slant in journals such as *Old Testament Essays*; *Journal for Biblical Literature*; *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* supports the view that biblical ecological ethics is not part of the main theological debate.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Hiers (1984:45-46): ‘Like civil rights and social security, ecology was not a topic within range of vision in biblical times.’

<sup>15</sup> It was only during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the first national parks were established in the USA and in many other countries. In South Africa it was mainly the devastation of wildlife caused by the rinderpest and persistent hunting that finally convinced authorities to establish the St. Lucia, Imfolozi, Hluhluwe and Sabie nature reserves between 1895 and 1898.

mans. This anthropocentric view of the Proverbs is succinctly summarised in Proverbs 19:8:

Those who get wisdom love their own lives;  
those who cherish understanding will soon prosper. (*NIV*)

Creation as a Leitmotif within wisdom literature is not as obvious as one would have hoped. Norman Habel (2000b:29) expressed it as follows:

If it does exist in the background, this underlying principle of creation clearly does not protect much of the literature from anthropocentric attitudes.

In the Pentateuch and prophetic texts some restrictions are put on the exploitation of natural resources. For example, the restriction to take both the mother and fledglings from a nest (Deut 22:6) and the prohibition or negative evaluation of clear-cutting forests during war (Deut 20:19; 1 Kgs 19:23-24) are often quoted by ecotheologians (Tucker 1997:12). Superficially these texts may look like a move toward some kind of conservation ethic, but again one may ask if this is really the case. Are these texts advocating a careful treatment of nature purely for the sake of nature, or for the sake of humans? Are these texts not again examples of an anthropocentric perspective that does not value nature for itself, but only in so far as it can be used by humans?

It should therefore be admitted, that the serious lack of *direct* evidence in the Bible with regard to environmental ethics and the Bible's strong anthropocentric point of view pose serious problems to the eco-sensitive biblical scholar.

The perceived silence of the Bible about environmental issues is further compounded by the lack of interest in nature among theologians. This is often due to various philosophical and theological reasons that we will discuss next.

## **E PHILOSOPHICAL, SOCIAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS**

Another part of the problem in searching for a biblical ecology is how the Bible was interpreted in the past. It should be recognised that biblical interpretation is always dependent on philosophy and that each generation needs to rewrite theology because it should be informed by current issues and needs (Hasel 1991:74-75). We will first consider certain philosophical viewpoints that may have prohibited theologians to sufficiently recognise the Bible's possible relevance to ecological issues.

### **1 Philosophical viewpoints**

One of the most persistent influences on Christian theology is the philosophy of the Greek philosopher Plato. Plato proposed a harsh dichotomy between the

material world (as perceived by our senses) and the higher world of Ideas. This view has led to the devaluation of the material and natural world in favour of the spiritual world in Western philosophy and Christian theology (Magee 1998:29). Viewed from this harsh hierarchical dualism it is considered inappropriate to pay too much attention to nature, and Plato even went so far as to deny that superior knowledge can be obtained from empirical observation (Magee 1998:32). To observe nature, as a possible source of knowledge, was regarded as a largely unprofitable venture. It follows logically from such a frame of reference that the earth and nature was not very highly regarded within Christian theology, as influenced by Platonism.<sup>16</sup> This philosophy found its clearest expression in Salvation History and the Millennialism movement within Christian theology (see later).

Another way in which Plato's dualism influenced biblical interpretation is evident from the translation of the Hebrew words 'šmym' (sky) as heavens and the term 'ml'k' (messenger) as angel. In this way the 'translation of the Hebrew Bible has created a celestial "Other" in biblical texts in place of the visible order of earth and sky' and a perception of messengers as heavenly beings (Conrad 2000:86). Conrad rightly maintains that this 'misleadingly suggest [...] divine messengers are understood as angelic envoys from another world' while it is clear from the Old Testament (in contrast to the New Testament) that these divine 'messengers are not celestial beings but human characters' (Conrad 2000:95). According to Conrad (2000:95) this introduces a dualism characteristic of the Western perception of reality, which strips the material world from divine presence.

Another major influence on Christian theology came from the Renaissance and its philosophy of reason with the subsequent development of the modern scientific method. In the religious sphere the Reformation followed logically from this new emphasis on reason. The influence of the Renaissance on the Protestant view of nature can best be described by the 'disenchantment' of nature. According to Creegan (2004:32) scholars variously attributed the disenchantment of the natural world not only to Protestantism, but also to the Constantine church, in the Thomistic emphasis upon secondary causation, or in Descartes' dualism.

Although White (1967:1203) linked this disenchantment to Christianity in general, it had its clearest expression within Protestantism. He summarised the result of this disenchantment as follows:

To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West.

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<sup>16</sup> It was mainly against this kind of hierarchical dualism that feminists have protested (Habel 2000b:32).

Peter Berger (1969:111) blamed the Reformation and more specific Calvinism for ‘truncating’ the biblical story by losing the sacramental connection with nature:

If compared with the ‘fullness’ of the Catholic universe, Protestantism appears as a radical truncation, a reduction to ‘essentials’ at the expense of a vast wealth of religious contents. This is especially true of the Calvinist version. [...] [I]t can be said that Protestantism divested itself as much as possible from the three most ancient and most powerful concomitants of the sacred – mystery, miracle and magic. This process has been aptly caught in the phrase ‘disenchantment of the world.’ The protestant believer no longer lives in a world ongoingly penetrated by sacred beings and forces.

Due to this disenchantment of nature, especially Protestant Christians and theologians became estranged from nature, which explains why ecological concerns were never high on their agenda.

## **2 Socio-political developments**

It is not always clear if ideology drives socio-political changes or if socio-political changes influence ideology.<sup>17</sup> However, most modern social scientists agree that influences take place in both directions. When considering the way in which the industrial revolution and colonialism may have contributed to our current ecological crisis, it is not only necessary to look at their physical effects on the environment, but also how Christian theology may have contributed, or alternatively legitimised these developments.

Habel (2000b:30) explained the way in which colonialism were supported by theological views as follows:

Under colonialist imperialism, the conquest of the peoples of the land was coupled with the conquest of the land itself. Many European colonists believed that God had indeed ‘given the land into their hands’, and with those hands they were obligated to clear that land for cultivation and colonization ‘as God intended’.

The industrial revolution and subsequent industrialisation could probably be considered the major cause for our current ecological crisis. Not only did it cause the increasing non-sustainable exploitation of resources, but also the severe pollution of the environment as its by-product.

Again one could ask, how could humans allow this to happen? Previous scholars have pointed out that Western Christian values strongly supported and enabled the development of capitalism with its emphasis on being industrious,

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<sup>17</sup> Marxist materialism tends to emphasise the priority of material realities, while Idealistic philosophy would argue for the primacy of ideology.

to work hard and to develop oneself. All these were essential ingredients toward making the industrial revolution possible.

Another related view, which supported both the industrial revolution and colonialism, was the idea that the so-called 'Fall' of humanity, described in Genesis 3, produced a permanent corruption of the land and that toil or effort would in future be required from humans to restore the productivity of the soil (Tucker 1997:9). Initially this Genesis text was only meant to explain why it was necessary to cultivate the land, but theologians later extended its interpretation to explain all kinds of industry, asking why it was 'expected' from the colonists to 'tame' and 'open up' the wilderness.

### 3 Theological stumbling blocks

Various theological viewpoints have further contributed toward the 'slighting' of ecological issues. The emphasis by theologians on Salvation History, to the detriment of creation theology became an issue in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At this time creation theology 'went out of fashion' in many theological circles. In Germany, partly as a stand against Nazism,<sup>18</sup> but also under influence of existential theology *Heilsgeschichte* became the focus of Old Testament theology (cf. Von Rad [1936] 1965). According to Von Rad the creation theme was a relatively late addition to salvation history and never played a central role in the theology of the Old Testament (Von Rad 1966:43-44). Redemption should always be given priority over creation. Habel (2000b:28) described the consequences of this approach as follows:

The effect of this thinking was to support, perhaps inadvertently, the devaluation of nature as God's domain in favour of history as the arena of God's mighty acts of salvation.

Although the neglect of creation theology has been criticised by later theologians, it nonetheless remains dominant in many circles: The salvation of the individual soul is all that really matters. In many fundamentalist circles this view is not only dominant, but is also closely linked to an anthropocentric theology, where humans are the only living creatures who have real intrinsic value.

A second, even more ecologically damaging tradition within theology is what Creegan (2004:33) called 'late twentieth century millennialism':

[T]he growing popularity of eschatological and apocalyptic stories [...] give little or no motivation for care of the earth [...] once the prerogative of Darbyites and sectarians, [it] is now popular and widespread in the USA, and in other American influenced evangelical movements.

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<sup>18</sup> In Nazi Germany (and in apartheid South Africa) the so-called 'order of creation' was often misused to legitimise racism. However, the misuse of a theological theme in one field does not necessarily exclude its positive usage in other fields.

Within millennialism it is believed that the faithful would very soon be swept away from earth and the 'obvious correlation is that present earth does not matter, is to be used and even destroyed with impunity' (Creegan 2004:33).

Tucker (1997:11-12) pointed out the negative impact which certain apocalyptic eschatological images in the Old Testament may have on theology. In certain end-time texts (e. g. Isa 11:6-9; Hs 1:18 and Ezek 34:25) the current earth is evaluated in a negative way because it is perceived as filled with predators and prey, violence and death. In contrast to this the new earth 'will be safe for domestic animals and children' (Tucker 1997:12).

## **F CONCLUSIONS**

A bleak picture has emerged with regard to the challenges posed to ecotheology. Certain biblical traditions and the way they were interpreted makes it difficult to construct a convincing ecotheology and to ensure that it becomes part of 'mainline' theological discussion. The Bible is often accused of being hostile or indifferent toward the environment. The main focus for these accusations was the idea expressed in Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 8 that humans should subdue the earth and rule over it, the anthropocentric viewpoint of Old Testament texts, the changes in socio-economic institutions brought about by patriarchal monotheism, the negative evaluation of the wilderness concept and the problematic perceptions of the land promises in the Pentateuch. The absence of a biblical concept of nature and the lack of attention given to the earth in wisdom literature were further identified as reasons why the Bible may seem indifferent to the earth.

For various philosophical and theological reasons nature and the environment have also not featured prominently (if at all) in biblical theology. Plato's philosophy and its devaluation of the material world and the disenchantment of nature as a result of the rationalism of the Renaissance and Reformation also had major influences on theological thought and its disregard for ecological issues. The focus on salvation, to the detriment of creation theology, as well as the increasing popularity of Millennialism, provides additional reasons for the lack of theological interest in nature.

However, the question remains open if these accusations against the Bible are true, specifically when interpreted within its wider context and if the lack of interest in the environment, although understandable, should be regarded as a serious flaw within Christian theology.

Like other contemporary ethical issues, which arrived relatively late on the human scene (e. g. abortion, stem cell research and genetic manipulation), environmental degradation first had to become a global issue before it was taken up by theology. During the past thirty years various attempts had been made to make environmental ethics part of 'mainstream' theology. Unfortu-

nately these attempts were not always successful and sometimes plagued by dubious theological and philosophical frameworks (see footnote 7).

It is highly likely that Old Testament scholars in South Africa have also been influenced by the above-mentioned philosophical and theological issues, which prevented them from giving sufficient attention to ecological matters or to respond strongly to the accusation that the Bible and/or biblical interpretation has been partly responsible for the exploitation of nature. This article's aims were to expose possible reasons for such a serious gap in biblical scholarship, to introduce relevant issues into the debate and to ask questions in order to set the stage for future critical discussions. Some questions which urgently need further discussion are:

- Can/should ecotheology become part of mainstream theology? Or should one accept that ecological issues will almost remain on the fringes of theological thought?
- If the texts of Genesis 1:28 and Ps 8 are at least indifferent towards the environment and at most hostile, how should they be interpreted in the light of the larger biblical context?
- To what extent can anthropocentrism be avoided in the ecological debate without violating the anthropocentric view of the Bible?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the concept of stewardship within the ecological debate – especially in the light of Harrison's (1999:86-106) idea that it was specifically a misplaced sense of stewardship (and not an arrogant indifference), which caused the ecological crisis?
- Can/should ecotheologians avoid the concepts of purpose and design, because they are such onerous concepts in evolutionary biology? Can ecotheologians do without them?
- Is it desirable or even possible to reverse the 'paradigm switch' which took place during the Enlightenment when a mago-mythical worldview was replaced by a rational scientific view of nature?<sup>19</sup> Is a mystical/spiritual appreciation of nature not in some cases a resurgence of modern paganism? Can eco-spirituality avoid paganism?

The article concludes with the above questions (without offering answers), but that was the purpose of the article, to put as many of these questions on the table for future debate.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Van Dyk (2005:863-878).



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