Taking Stock of Old Testament Scholarship on Environmental Issues in South Africa: The Main Contributions and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a survey of Old Testament scholarship on environmental issues in South Africa since the first contribution in this field in 1987. Reference is made to 33 significant studies. The survey highlights hermeneutical issues, and it suggests that, in terms of Paul Ricoeur's idea of a "hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval," the earlier studies seem to cluster around the "retrieval" element, whereas most of the more recent studies contain a healthy dose of "suspicion" with regard to both the biblical texts and extant interpretation of the texts. A threefold typology of eco-theological studies (covenantal, prophetic and mystic), which is a combination of the typologies offered by Rosemary Radford Ruether and David Tracy, is also employed to highlight some of the affinities and differences between the studies that were the object of the survey. The article concludes with a number of challenges to Old Testament scholars exploring the field of eco-theology, and a statement on the state of the debate.

A INTRODUCTION

N. H. Creegan (2004:32) says 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.

This article is an attempt to determine to what extent Creegan's observation applies to eco-theological studies in South Africa in the field of Old Testament scholarship. The first part of my essay consists of an overview of these studies, and the second part is an attempt to highlight a few tendencies and identify some challenges.

B ECO-THEOLOGICAL STUDIES BY OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARS IN SOUTH AFRICA SINCE 1987

To my knowledge the first eco-theological study by an Old Testament scholar in South Africa was published in 1987. Since that date at least 34 significant studies have been undertaken in the form of 15 journal articles, 14 chapters in

four books, and three Master's dissertations or Doctoral theses. Brief reference will also be made to one newspaper article and one unpublished paper.

In 1974, at the annual meeting of the South African Academy for Science and Arts, all participants were invited to deliver papers on the topic of ecology, excluding four theologians who also attended the meeting. The four theologians were requested to speak on a different topic, namely "Modern people and the Bible." For one particular theologian, Prof. B. J. Engelbrecht, it was an odd arrangement, given his interest in nature and ecology. This incident suggests that, at that time, the South African academic community could not imagine how theologians could make meaningful contributions to debates on environmental matters.

A decade later in 1985, the Old Testament scholar, J. A. Loader (1985:33), reported to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) on the state of theological research in South Africa. Ecology appeared on his list of issues that had received little or no attention among South African theologians. However, in the same year J. Buitendag completed his doctoral studies in Dogmatics at the University of Pretoria on *Skepping en Ekologie. 'n Sistematiese ondersoek na die teologiese verstaan van die werklikheid*[1] Buitendag was a student of Prof. B. J. Engelbrecht. Interestingly, Engelbrecht, Loader and Buitendag are all members of the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika*.

Loader was the first South African Old Testament scholar to make a contribution in the field of eco-theology. In 1987 he delivered a paper titled "Image and order: Old Testament perspectives on the ecological crisis" at an interdisciplinary symposium on Ecology and Theology, arranged by the Institute for Theological Research at the University of South Africa. The papers presented at the symposium were subsequently published in a book, *Are we killing God's earth? Ecology and Theology*. As one would expect, Loader's paper commences with critical observations of the debate at that stage, followed by some critical comments on views expressed in the debate, an overview of ecological motifs in the Christian tradition of the West, and finally two Old Testament symbols that feature in ecotheological debates, namely "image" and "order."

Two observations made by Loader should be highlighted: First, with regard to the accusation that Western Christianity has been fostering an alienation between humans and nature, he observes that it is not without irony that the discovery of this polarity with its one-sided emphasis on humans *vis-à-vis* nature has tended to perpetuate the polarity. According to him the only difference seems to be that the one-sidedness has shifted from humans to nature. In the general debate on conservation and ecology, humans continually feature as the villains, the plunderers and the killers (cf. Loader 1987:12-13).

[1] "Creation and ecology. A systematic exploration of the theological understanding of reality."

The second observation that requires highlighting occurs in Loader's discussion of the symbol "order." Loader (1987:22) suggests that "…the problem of the ecological crisis or of the theology of nature could not have been formulated more succinctly than in terms of the ancient sapiential premise." He explains that the wisdom movement, which was not primarily interested in soteriology or salvation, hinges on the idea of order. As the very cornerstone of all human culture real wisdom conserves. Here we find no sign of polarisation between nature and humans, but also no anti-anthropocentrism or anti-humanism. An important aspect of the wisdom perspective is the unity of reality. It is not bifurcated into "nature" and "culture." Later in my article I will return to these two observations about Loader's pioneering work.

In 1990, Loader published an article titled "Natuur en wysheid: een en ander oor die vraag of die wiel herontdek word."[2] In this article Loader elaborates on his claim (highlighted above) that the problem of the ecological crisis or of a theology of nature could not have been formulated more succinctly than in terms of the ancient sapiential premise. In this article he identifies four themes which are central to modern ecological concerns, namely order, responsibility, the relationship between nature and culture, and nature and wonder. These are compared to what is found in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. He suggests that the ecological wheel was not invented by the Green Movement, but that it was already deeply reflected upon by the sapiential tradition. He concludes (Loader 1990:168):[3]

> As die sogenaamde primitiewe wysheid dan die [ekologiese] wiel uitgevind het, as die oud-Oosterse wysgere… al vier die wiele van die hedendaagse ekologiese wa gebou het, dan *is* die wysheid aktueel. En dan het die teologie ook 'n goeie kans om aktueel te wees. As ons die wysgere *nadoen* eerder as om hul wysheid tot die middelpunt van die Ou Testament te verklaar, dan het ons 'n kans om nie soseer 'n nuwe teologie van die Ou Testament te skryf nie, as om 'n perspektief te open wat ons huidige wêreld kan help bevry uit die verstikking van sy ekologiese krisis én die verstikking van 'n onchokmatiese eksklusiwisme. 'n Holistiese ekologie sluit mos kultuur en godsdiens en alles in en die wysheid sluit die hele lot in.

[2] "Nature and wisdom: a thing or two about the question whether the wheel is being reinvented."

[3] "If then the so-called primitive wisdom invented the [ecological] wheel, if the ancient Eastern sages … built all four wheels of the current ecological wagon, then wisdom is relevant. And then theology also stands a good chance of being relevant. If we imitate the sages rather than declaring their wisdom the centre of the Old Testament, then we stand a chance, not so much to write a new theology of the Old Testament, as to offer a perspective that can contribute to the liberation of our present-day world from the suffocation of the ecological crisis and the suffocation of unchokmatic exclusivism. A holistic ecology indeed includes culture and religion and everything, and wisdom includes the lot."

Interestingly, the first eco-theological publications by Dutch Reformed Old Testament scholars also coincided with the completion of a doctoral thesis on eco-theology in the field of dogmatics by a member of that denomination. In 1991 C. J. P. le Roux submitted a thesis titled "Eko-teo-logie: Op soek na 'n eko-teo-logie vir die moderne tegnieker." Also in 1991, in a book titled "Mens en Omgewing" ("Human being and Environment"), no less than seven of the twenty-one contributors were scholars of the Hebrew Bible, namely F. E. Deist, L. C. Bezuidenhout, J. H. Potgieter, G. T. M. Prinsloo, W. S. Prinsloo, J. A. Loader, and D. Heyns (who was the first female biblical scholar in South Africa to make a contribution in the field of eco-theology). The majority of chapters consist of sermon-designs that include quite extensive exegetical work.

Several of these studies have a *theo-centric* focus (in contrast to later geo-centric studies), which could be explained either as due to their selection of texts (mostly psalms), or their hermeneutical stance, or both. Bezuidenhout (1991:83) says the function of nature in Job 38-39 is to give us insight into the *council of God*. Potgieter (1991:105) concludes that in Psalm 19 nature, scripture and humans are *witnesses of God*. The title of G. T. M. Prinsloo's (1991:146) analysis of Psalm 104 is *"God cares for us all!"* W. S. Prinsloo (1991:158) argues that Psalm 147 encourages us to *praise the Lord because He is great*.

All four scholars offering a theo-centric interpretation of the biblical text attempt to analyse the poems "as they present themselves," which implies that the meaning of a poem can be deduced from indicators inherent in the text itself (cf. Potgieter 1991:106-107). G. T. M. Prinsloo (1991:147, 151) lists some of these indicators: morphological and syntactical data, the structure of the text, and its genre.

Loader (1991a:165), claims that even his selection of a text for a sermon-design (Ps 150) was influenced by his hermeneutical stance. He argues that the church's interest in ecological matters was inspired neither by the Christian tradition nor by what the Bible says, but by the (secular) ecological movement. For this reason he decided not to select one of the obvious passages on nature in the Bible, but a poem that came to mind when he considered an insight of the ecological movement, namely the impossibility of separating culture from nature. He says (Loader 1991a:165):[4]

> As ons teksgedeelte bewustelik vanuit hierdie gesigspunt gekies word, dan sal dit ook die hoek wees van waaruit ons die lied lees.

Furthermore, Loader (1991a:165) explains that his analysis involves a close reading of the text, as well as a consideration of the religio-historical and

[4] "If our passage is deliberately chosen from this viewpoint, then it will also be the angle from which we read the song."

cultural-historical embeddedness of motifs in the text. He would not allow the "paradigm-anger" that raged at the time (especially in Afrikaans theological circles) to prevent him from noticing certain details because they are literary in nature, or spotting other details because they are of a historical kind. Loader is aware of the fact that ideological considerations that are not necessarily determined by one's methodology, affect one's interpretation of a text. He states that he deliberately put on an environmental lens, which would allow him to indicate the religious basis of an essentially ecological insight. In this way he found in Psalm 150 both the nature-temple and the culture-temple, which explains why the poem ends with "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!" In these concluding words the nature-culture dichotomy ceases to exist.

F. E. Deist, who was also a contributor to this book, analysed Genesis 2-3. He points out that a dogmatic interpretation of this text would cause this Hebrew narrative to lose much of its dynamics and power. He argues that the garden narrative does not describe a particular "state" in which human beings find themselves. Rather, it invites readers to discover themselves in the narrative in order to be confronted with its ethical implications, including the restoration of the earth. Our choices still determine whether life or death enters God's garden (Deist 1991:65).

In the same volume L. M. Heyns and D. Heyns explore the text and historical context of Amos 4:6-13. Based on a literary analysis, they argue that this passage represents the climax of Amos' rhetoric, and it emphasises the possibility of total destruction of Israel as a result of an ecological catastrophe. The primeval chaos is going to get the upper hand and the earth will become a formless void again (Heyns & Heyns 1991:190). Based on their analysis of this passage, Heyns and Heyns (1991:192-194) highlight three theological themes: the question whether the impending ecological disaster was caused by human neglect, or divine judgement; an appeal to worship God; and the cosmic dimension of hope.

Only one of the Old Testament scholars who contributed to this book continued working in the field of eco-theology, namely Loader. In 1991 Loader was invited to read a paper at the annual congress on "Mission and Ecology" of the Southern African Missiological Society. In his paper titled "Life, wonder and responsibility. Some thoughts on ecology and Christian mission," Loader (1991b) suggests that our thoughts on ecology and mission should be directed by the concept of life. He argues that *mission* is about the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the gospel is about life — life for the world (the cosmos). With regard to an *ecological* perspective on life, Loader compares mechanistic views of life with vitalist philosophy. According to him, mechanist views of life may be attractive on the biological level, but they become inadequate if extended to cover all levels of life (cf. Loader 1991b:49). Loader says the main contribution

of the vitalist movement is the insight that life is more than physics and chemistry. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, one of the vitalist scholars, for example refused to separate the life of the spirit from the life of organisms. He said that in addition to the chemical level, life also comprises the spirit with its activities of feeling and thought, and it reaches out beyond the individual into societies and interrelationships. Loader (1991b:50) summarises an ecological view of life with reference to the work of J. Fourie *et al.* (1990:100-105):

> (1) Life is a process rather than a state; (2) life is part of a continuum; (3) life has teleological directiveness — it is en route to some goal; (4) on all levels life consists of interrelationships; (5) at least in the higher forms of life consciousness is found, which may entail spiritual activity.

From a *theological* perspective, the ancient Hebrews and members of the early Christian church seemed to have experienced the aspects of life as a whole in what is sometimes called a "synthetic view of life" (cf. Loader 1991b:51). The idea of the wholeness of life seems to be common to biblical literature and contemporary Western ecological thinking. Loader (1991b:53) concludes:

> If the gospel to be spread in the world is about life, and if environmental concern is about that same life, then certainly the two must meet — which is now beginning to happen all over the world, including our part of it.

Loader (1991b:56) adds:

> Life has been put in motion by God. It is a teleological process. Whereto? We do not know, since the *telos*, the destination, is part of God's mystery which makes faith possible. But we do know that, if life itself is going somewhere, its destination must also be life.

A decade later the teleological principle was also taken up by the Earth Bible Project (cf. Habel 2000:24) to which I will return. The Earth Bible team identified "purpose" as one of six ecojustice principles that guide the project members' readings of the Bible. However, Van Dyk (2009:201) questioned the value of the concepts of purpose and design, because they are onerous concepts in evolutionary biology. It seems Loader's article and the kind of response it invited, have begun to sensitise us to the interdisciplinary ramifications of eco-theological studies.

In 1992 Loader wrote an article titled "Seeing God with natural eyes: On Job and nature" in which he addresses the issue of God's transcendence and/or immanence (cf. Loader 1992:346). Loader argues that since the non-operation of the doctrine of retribution calls into question wisdom's immanent world-order, the sufferer needs neither a mechanical world-principle nor its divine warrant, but a God who is himself immanent. Loader demonstrates that in the book

of Job the immanence of the Creator God becomes apparent in nature and not in theological propositions about him. However, the immanent God who is encountered in nature must also be transcendent as the Creator God (cf. Loader 1992:346). Loader focuses on several texts in the book of Job and concludes that in the so-called Divine Speech, Job did not need to be reminded of God's power. The key to the nature poem is to be found in its effect on Job, and this is given in 42:5:

> From hearsay did I hear things about you, but now my eyes have seen you.

In the Job character's use of the nature motif, he showed that he too subscribed to the concept of God which accompanied the doctrine of a transcendent, fearsome God. Now God has taken him through that same nature, and something has happened. He has seen God! Job desired to encounter this God. In 19:26-27 he expresses this desire outright:

> I desire to see God in the flesh,
> to see him myself, with my own eyes…

Job has encountered God in nature — in the world of wonderful processes and wonderful species, in the world of which Job himself is part. Job has been confronted with the Mystery that lies beyond all concepts, doctrines and propositions (Loader 1992:358).

Through studies of this nature, biblical scholars can enter into dialogue with colleagues in the broader community of theologians. Loader's findings, for example, enrich debates on the doctrine of God, and they suggest exciting possibilities for the praxis of Christian or Jewish spirituality.

Four years later, in 1996, G. M. Augustyn completed his doctoral thesis in Old Testament titled "Psalm 104: 'n Ekoteologiese perspektief"[5] at the University of Pretoria. In the footsteps of his promoter, Prof. W S Prinsloo, he adopted, in his own words, a "meticulous," "multi-dimensional," and "controlled" reading strategy which involves synchronic and diachronic analyses, in that order (Augustyn 1996:11). He assumed that such an approach would enable him to unearth meaningful perspectives on the ecosystem which are embedded in the Old Testament (Augustyn 1996:6, 268). He identified three interpretive dimensions: text, context, and further construction. The *textual* dimension involves attention to mainly the genre and structure of the text, as well as linguistic strategies that enabled the author to richly describe the natural environment. With regard to *context*, he considered the literary context of the Psalm, as well as present-day readers' experiences of the ecological crisis. Augustyn (1996:268) claims that his detailed analysis of the Psalm reveals many points for further eco-theological *construction*. He highlights two points: First,

[5] "Psalm 104: An eco-theological perspective."

since it is a hymn of praise, the psalm opens up avenues for experiencing a revelation of God and an appreciation of nature. Second, the sense of balance and arrangement found on the literary level reflects the balance and arrangement in the natural environment, while the reader is also led to acknowledge the Sustainer of it all (Augustyn 1996:268). Augustyn's approach and findings strongly resemble those of the earlier studies of Bezuidenhout, Potgieter, G. T. M. Prinsloo and W. S. Prinsloo.

Also in 1996, H. J. M. van Deventer wrote an article titled "'Groen' Israel — ekologiese rigtingwysers uit Levitikus 25:1-7?"[6]. After a brief survey of views in the eco-theological debate, Van Deventer (1996:185-190) indicates his preference for a reading strategy that is based on the text in its literary and historical context. In his view reading strategies that are based on dogmatic or philosophical-ethical considerations are less convincing. He also questions "'n suiwer ekologiese lees" ("a purely ecological reading") of the Bible. He gives several examples (Van Deventer 1996:190-193). First, some argue that the Holy Spirit, not the Bible, is the motivator for the so-called "green struggle," consequently biblical texts are not expected to offer insights into ecological concerns (cf. Daneel 1993:322). Secondly, and in his view more dangerous, is the use of the Bible as if almost every verse in it has an ecological bearing. Thirdly, the context of the biblical text is negated in favour of the (ecological) context of the reader. Fourthly, nature images are used in unconvincing ways. Fifthly, the prooftext method is used — again disregarding the context of the text. Sixthly, a sound principle relevant to a particular biblical context is applied to unrelated ecological matters. Seventhly, conclusions are drawn from a text on the basis of lexical agreement with another text.

Van Deventer (1996:193-198) then analyses Leviticus 25:1-7 which deals with the sabbatical year. He concludes that the idea of rest for the earth is based on the principle that it is a sabbath for Yahweh. So the sabbath year is not primarily for the sake of the land (otherwise it would amount to pantheism). It is also not primarily for the sake of human beings (otherwise it would boil down to anthropocentrism). Does it therefore mean that this passage has no ecological bearing? Not at all, argues Van Deventer, instead of holding a feast for Yahweh every seventh year for the land he has given them; they are told to introduce a law that benefits the land, but this reminds them of God's ownership of the land. In this way care for the land becomes the response of human beings to the holiness of God (Van Deventer 1996:197-198). Van Deventer (1996:198) concludes that few Old Testament texts offer ecological principles. The texts contain principles of a theological nature, and some of these theological principles have a bearing on ecological matters.

[6] ("'Green' Israel — ecological signposts from Leviticus 25:1-7?")

At the turn of the century the Australian Old Testament scholar, Norman Habel, editor of the five volume Earth Bible series, invited four Old Testament scholars to contribute to the project. This project was a deliberate attempt to read the Bible from the perspective of Earth in order to do justice to Earth (Habel 2000:9-10). For this purpose six ecojustice principles have been identified, which are basic to the approach of writers in the project. The six principles are (1) Intrinsic worth, (2) Interconnectedness, (3) Voice, (4) Purpose, (5) Mutual custodianship, and (6) Resistance.

The series contains chapters written by five South African Old Testament scholars: I. J. J. Spangenberg, H. Viviers, M. J. Masenya, G. H. Wittenberg, and the present author. Spangenberg's chapter is titled "Who cares? Reflections on the story of the ostrich (Job 39:13-18)". He addresses the question as to why the ostrich is presented as "careless" and "devoid of wisdom" in this passage. He offers an interesting explanation by suggesting that this passage addresses the issue of reward and retribution (Spangenberg 2001:101). He points out that from the outset, Job expected to be rewarded for caring for the orphans, widows and the poor. Job accused God of not caring about the upright or the needy. Spangenberg argues that by focusing on the ostrich, God is driving home the point that rewards should not be the primary concern of human beings. According to the text, the ostrich does not care about rewards since God, as custodian, takes care of animals and birds. As a keen birdwatcher, Spangenberg is able to point out that the carelessness of the ostrich is an inaccurate portrayal of this fascinating bird, but states that this knowledge is irrelevant to the interpretation of the text. Spangenberg (2001:102) says the author portrays the ostrich as devoid of wisdom by design. God seems to have a special bond with all creatures — even those that are "fools" without wisdom. Spangenberg applies this principle to the ecological responsibility of human beings: "We would be wise… to remember our role as custodians even of creatures that appear to be less than loving and wise" (Spangenberg 2001:102). The ecojustice principle of mutual custodianship is exemplified in Spangenberg's interpretation of this passage.

In a newspaper article, Spangenberg (2002:7) again refers to the depiction of the ostrich in God's speech in Job 38-39. He also points out that shortly after World War I, the ostrich species that was endemic to countries in the Near East, became extinct. Sophisticated rifles enabled people to wipe this species off the surface of the earth in a decade or two. Spangenberg uses bird imagery to emphasise the impact of human beings on the environment: we are like the Indian minah, which threatens other bird species by aggressively colonising their habitat. Spangenberg (2002:7) contends that we pretend to be the most important species on Earth and traditional Christian doctrines reinforce this idea, especially the ideas that Christianity is primarily about the saving of human souls, or ensuring human well-fare and prosperity.

In the Earth Bible series, H. Viviers contributed a chapter titled "Eco-delight in the Song of Songs." His study highlights several ecojustice principles: the celebrative voice of Earth and its inhabitants, the interconnectedness of the Earth community, and Nature's intrinsic worth (Viviers 2001:144). According to Viviers (2001:154) the Song of Songs delights in the phenomenon of romantic love that also subverts the religious and moral mores of its time. The Song also delights in Earth and all its inhabitants, as Viviers (2001:1543) says: "Humans have 'eyes for Nature' as much as they have 'eyes only for each other.'" Earth is the home of human beings and other inhabitants are their kin. They feel at home even in wild, uninhabited Nature. They enrich their bodiliness by supplementing it with body Nature. Viviers (2001:154) finally suggests that we need more than scientific reports to make us environmentally aware — we also need love stories like the Song of Songs to touch us deeply.

A third contribution to the Earth Bible project was made by the present author. In a chapter titled "Ecclesiastes 3:16-22: An ecojustice reading, with parallels from African wisdom" he attempts to interpret this passage from the perspective of one of the six ecojustice principles mentioned above, namely the principle of purpose, although he also acknowledges the relevance of the principles of intrinsic worth and interconnectedness. He points out that at first glance there seems to be tension between the concepts of *purpose* (in the sense of an all-encompassing cosmic design) and *absurdity*, which is how Qohelet repeatedly characterises "life under the sun" (Van Heerden 2001:155). He suggests that the absurdity of life as experienced by Qohelet does not seem to lie in the meaninglessness of the observed patterns in life. In this passage both the patterns of injustice followed by punishment (or righteousness followed by reward), and being taken from Earth and returning to Earth, are meaningful or serve a purpose. For Qohelet the absurdity of life lies in how these patterns interact or interfere with each other. Often the one pattern prevents the other from reaching its goal, or completing its cycle, because the patterns are out of step with each other. Death often interferes before injustices are set right or before righteousness is rewarded (Van Heerden 2001:166).

The present author (Van Heerden 2001:166-167) reflects on two ecological implications of his analysis of the text in terms of the principle of purpose: First, the need to acknowledge the complexity of the interaction between a multitude of patterns in life, and second, the fact that modern humans tend to push aside or suppress the reality of death, perhaps because death has no regard for other meaningful patterns in life — as an African proverb says: "Man [sic] is looking for wealth (or justice) while death is looking for him" (Van Heerden 2001:158). But, paradoxically, in our efforts to push death away, we have surrounded ourselves with material things and in so doing we are killing Earth by exhausting finite resources.

In the Earth Bible series M. J. Masenya contributed a chapter on "An ecobosadi reading of Psalm 127:3-5." She states that her interpretation of the psalm is informed by her experience as an African-South African woman who is Earth-conscious. She investigates whether the Israelite and African world-views in terms of procreation and the value placed on children can be empowering for African women, if read from an ecobosadi perspective. She uses another psalm, Psalm 132:3-5, with some Northern Sotho proverbs as a framework for her analysis. The present author's contribution to this volume also exploits the use of African proverbs (Van Heerden 2001). Masenya coined the term "ecobosadi" in order to indicate the distinctiveness of her approach, which is firstly, committed to, and addresses the unique context of, African-South African women as the "other" in their unique contexts, and secondly, the experiences of Earth, which like women, has long been marginalised and oppressed. This approach reads the Bible having taken sides with the oppressed Earth and aiming at its liberation.

Masenya (2001:122) concludes that from an ecobosadi point of view, recognising the mutual interdependence of women, children, and land, the focus moves from "filling" Earth to preserving Earth as part of who we are – including recognising the human family as a heritage of God. Mothers and Earth suffer a common abuse from the male drive to multiply children. They are not only interconnected as parts of the web of creation, but also as abused creatures in the cycle of misguided procreation. According to Masenya (2001:122) an ecobosadi approach suggests that it pleases God when a family devotes full attention to those "outside" members of the Earth community as an extended family. With regard to Psalm 127 she claims that the androcentric nature of the text, with the consequent suppression of the voices of Earth and women, can only serve to perpetuate the received belief that some members of the Earth community are more important than others.

The Earth Bible series also contains a chapter written by G. H. Wittenberg (2001) on "The vision of land in Jeremiah 32." He explores what effect the greatest disaster in Israel's history, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile, had on Israel's primal vision of land. He wanted to see whether in the triad of Yahweh, Israel and the land, the land retained its *intrinsic worth*, and whether the principle of *mutual custodianship*, central in Israel's primal vision of the land, could be upheld. Two of the Earth Bible ecojustice principles therefore also inform Wittenberg's study. Two alternative views of land have emerged from his analysis of the structure and investigation into the literary problems of Jeremiah 32. The first is urban-based. Rich landowners residing in cities saw land mainly as a means for obtaining rent, that is, as a form of capital that could be sold and traded at will. The Deuteronomistic hope for the replanting of Israel in the land is also urban-based. The other vision of land is the "primal vision of Israel." Land, in this view, has intrinsic worth. It has to be kept in the possession of the family, and to be redeemed from unscrupulous specula-

tors, even if this redemption does not bring direct financial benefits. Wittenberg argues that only the second vision of land does justice to the principles of intrinsic worth and mutual custodianship.

The Earth Bible project sparked a number of studies by H. Viviers. In addition to his contribution to this project, he also wrote an article on "Body and nature in Job," which was published in 2002. The chapter starts with a discussion of the views of a Bushman tribe of the central Kalahari on the relationship between humans and their environment. The Bushman people regard themselves as part and parcel of their natural surroundings. Animal behaviour, especially that of mammals, is seen as rational, purposeful and overtly anthropomorphic. Human bodies, body society, and body nature blend in a remarkable, harmonious interaction (Viviers 2002:510-511). Viviers (2002:511) then asks the question: What bodily view do we find in Job? A social constructionist framework guides his exploration of the issue, which is apparent from his claim that *we create our own reality* through symbolisation and central to this is our bodiliness. He also observes that "I come to see the forest not only through my own eyes, but as the other sees it… we supplement our embodiment through the other" (Viviers 2002:516). He also argues that we tend to personify the natural world and metaphorise humans in terms of nature in our efforts to negotiate understanding. Mutual incorporation also takes place when we absorb nature and at the same time we are swallowed up or become absorbed by it (Viviers 2002:516). Against this background Viviers (2002:522) concludes that nature or cosmos in the Divine Speeches in Job is neither a rendering of brute, objective facts about nature, nor a "revelation," even though presented as a "God's eye-view" of reality by letting Yahweh speak. The Divine Speeches reflect a metaphoric extension of an idealised, homeostatic body. It questions, true to protest wisdom, the mechanistic body of mainstream, upper-class patriarchy, which is poor and unbalanced and does not accommodate the richness of life. According to Viviers (2002:522-523) this homeostatic body, which is characterised by universal interconnectedness, should concretise as compassion for all, an aesthetic openness to life, and communion with all.

In the same year Viviers and one of his students, R. Maarschalk, published an article which is based on, and bears the same title as Maarschalks' doctoral thesis on "Die godsredes in die boek Job, ideologie en eko-teologie."[7] The authors argue that their "green"-ideological exploration of the text lays bare its subtext of eco-justice. Creation, in its intimate relationship with God, has intrinsic value and worth, and – to a certain extent – becomes holy. Their argument thus embraced one of the Earth Bible eco-justice principles, namely intrinsic value. They claim that nature should be seen in a theocentric, instead of an anthropocentric way. Earth does not exist for the sake of humans alone. Humans are not above nature, but co-subjects of the earth community and

[7] "The Divine Speeches in the book of Job, ideology and eco-theology."

should utilise its inhabitants as role models in the mastering of the art of life. Based on these findings, the authors also explore possible ways for school and church to play key roles in promoting a universal environmental ethics. The biblical passage challenges these institutions to address, in their own ranks, anthropocentrism that threatens to annihilate God's creation (Maarschalk & Viviers 2002:125)

In 2003 another student of Viviers, E. van Heerden (2003), completed his Master's dissertation on "Die eko-teologiese uitdaging aan die Apostoliese Geloof Sending van Suid-Afrika."[8] His study aims at inculcating a biblically founded, practical eco-awareness in the members of the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa by proving that salvation theology on its own leads to an impoverished, one-sided ethos, and that the negation of eco-equity in the Bible has far-reaching consequences in terms of sustainable development.

The year 2004 saw the completion of a Master's dissertation titled "Eco-theology: Christian and Muslim perspectives" of yet another student of Viviers, M. H. Abdull. The study addresses the question whether the application and accentuation of "green" sentiments ensconsed within the respective Christian and Muslim faiths can facilitate the realisation and appreciation of shared ground between these two faiths. He contends that it can promote a constructive and purposeful effort by both faiths (also in combination) to contribute to nature conservation and indirectly to religious tolerance (Abdull 2004: Summary). Abdull (2004:24) aims to determine a common agenda between the Christian and Muslim faiths to actively realise programmes of ecojustice in conserving natural resources for future generations. He highlights "green" perspectives in what he calls "some commendable studies by Christian and Muslim specialists in their faiths, texts and traditions" (Abdull 2004:24). Abdull employs the so-called ideological texture of texts, which is associated with Vernon K Robbins's socio-rhetorical method (cf. Robbins 1996) in his exploration of texts from the Old Testament and the Qur'an.

Viviers published articles that involve eco-theological readings of Psalm 150 and Psalm 148 in 2003 and 2004 respectively. In both cases he concludes that the psalm does not pass the test of eco-justness (Viviers 2003:59; 2004:815). Guided by his hermeneutic of suspicion, he points out that many commentators just go along with the male ideological thrust of the psalm, without questioning the maleness of Yahweh. He claims that the construct of Yahweh as the "super" male, symbolising Israel's success as a nation, is not good news for eco-sensitivity and eco-responsibility. Female Earth becomes vulnerable given this shaping of society, which is aimed at serving male hegemony, values and interests (Viviers 2004:815). In his study on Psalm 148 (Viviers 2004:815) he concludes that to uncritically reinscribe Psalm 148's androcentric,

[8] "The eco-theological challenge to the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa."

ideological stance would lead to an impoverishment and a one dimensional view of life in general.

Viviers (2004:819) positions himself over against W. S. Prinsloo's analysis of Psalm 148 (see Prinsloo [1991] 2000), which he describes as a typical non-ideological appreciation of the psalm. He argues that the construct "god" makes an ideological grasp on the text of this psalm possible. He contends that, irrespective of our physical, psychological or social needs for the conceptualisation of "god" we can know this "god" only as metaphor, as a language-creation, through which societies regulate themselves meaningfully. Personification of "god" is necessary to stabilise and concretise a society's values. However, we do not only personify gods, but also natural phenomena. The question is: Who is the "god" of Psalm 148? Yahweh is a human being, and he is clearly male. Where Prinsloo contends that the objective God deserves everyone's praise, Viviers (2004:823), on the other hand, attempts to deconstruct this God-concept. As a god, Yahweh represents the highest, the best, and the most powerful, but this "god" is a projection of Israel's honour. The final verse of the psalm is our clue:

> He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful,
> For the people of Israel who are close to him.
> Praise the Lord.

Viviers (2004:824) argues that in the same way we project our concepts of society and societal values onto nature. The macro-cosmos becomes a mirror image of the micro-cosmos. For example, in Psalm 148 the feminine sea monster is controlled by Yahweh. Viviers (2004:825) agrees with Brueggemann who states that in the rhetorical pattern here it is power and not graciousness which overwhelms the assembled creation.

F. Klopper represents another female voice in the eco-theology debate. In 2005 she explored the "water in the wilderness" motif in the Psalms and the Prophets. She points out that through the ages humankind reflected on existential questions regarding life and death, fertility and sterility, the reasons for disasters and what the future holds. All these matters are central in ecological debates (Klopper 2005:263). She argues that the "water in the wilderness" motif contributed to their reflection. The wilderness (מדבר) and primal waters (תהום) were understood as powers of chaos, rendered harmless by Yahweh through the miraculous provision of springs of water. But, paradoxically, it was the tamed wilderness in the writings of the exilic prophets and the conquered chaos waters in Psalms 74 and 104 which, like Tiamat, gave birth to the gift of life (Klopper 2005:263). It should be noted that Klopper does not deconstruct the male "control" element of the paradox, but maintains the creative tension between the poles of control and chaos. She concludes: Concealed in the chaos there is cosmos and order; in meaninglessness there is meaning; in exile there is hope and restoration.

Also in 2005 the present author, who contributed to the Earth Bible himself, critically reflected on Norman Habel's interpretation of the creation narrative in Genesis 1 in that series. Habel claims that the first creation narrative actually consists of two stories: the Earth story (Gen 1:1-25; 1:31-2:4a), which is the primary story, and the human story (1:26-30), which interrupts the Earth story. According to Habel the two stories are in conflict, and people are set over against Earth. Van Heerden (2005:374-384) argues that interesting parallels exist between Habel's interpretation of Genesis 1, which was informed by the framework provided by the Earth Bible project, and the text and context of the first creation narrative itself. Both have a crisis context (the exile and the ecological crisis); both give special prominence to the victim in the crisis (human beings and Earth); both make use of a cosmological framework when offering alternative perspectives in attempts to deconstruct dominant destructive forces (six days of creation and six ecological principles). It is also shown that Habel's decision to read the first creation narrative from the perspective of Earth prevented him from giving attention to its exilic context, as well as to its clearly schematic and symmetrical characteristics (Van Heerden 2005:384-385). The present author (Van Heerden 2005:391) also suggests that the text can be viewed as doing justice to Earth when it is read, as a harmonious whole, from the perspective of the *victim*. The present author's article is an attempt to show that a commendable hermeneutical point of departure does not necessarily safeguard the interpreter from pushing prominent features of a text to the margins where they are easily overlooked.

On 4 April 2006 Gunther H. Wittenberg delivered the Second Gunther Wittenberg lecture at the Lutheran Theological Institute, School of Religion and Theology of the University of Kwazulu-Natal. His topic was "Plant and animal rights – an absurd idea or ecological necessity? Perspectives from the Hebrew Torah." The lecture was subsequently published in a collection of Wittenberg's essays titled "Resistance theology in the Old Testament" (Wittenberg 2007). The lecture started with references to confrontations between developers and environmentalists, which confrontations highlighted a fundamental ethical problem: Do frogs, chameleons, or butterflies have a right to life and protection that could even supersede the sacred right of property owners and developers, or is this an absurd idea, especially if one considers the contribution the developers make to the economy? Wittenberg wishes to test the claim that the moral universe, with its rights and duties, has to be restricted to the human realm, as some developers claim. In this regard he considers some of the pertinent laws from the Hebrew Torah. He explores texts from the Book of the Covenant, from Deuteronomy, and from the Priestly Writing and the Holiness Code (Wittenberg 2007:159-168). Wittenberg 2007:169) summarises his findings as follows:

> The Biblical law codes in ever widening circles, from the mixed community of humans and domestic animals to the biotic commu-

> nity of wild animals and the trees of the field, up to the outer circle community of life on the land, have shown that in all these levels of community, nature has to be treated with respect. Plants and animals enjoy rights, not derived from humans, but from the Creator himself.

In 2006 L. P. Maré interpreted Psalm 8 in an attempt to explore the relation between God's glory as it is revealed in creation, and the glory of humankind, as the apex of creation. He concludes that the psalm indicates that humankind finds its glory and superior position in the glory and the majesty of Yahweh. However, he adds, humankind's authority over all the other creatures should be understood as delegated authority. Therefore, humans have the obligation not to exploit creation for its own selfish purposes (Maré 2006:937). Maré's article is similar to the Psalms studies of W. S. Prinsloo fifteen years earlier in two respects: the methodology (focus on structure, Gattung, Sitz im Leben, etc.), and a theocentric hermeneutic where ideological questions do not come into view.

In the same year J. H. Coetzee also attempted an interpretation of Psalm 8. He read the psalm from a bodily perspective. With reference to the work of Leder, he argues that all human experiences are embodied, including the rational world we create. We can only respond to our surrounding world via bodily means. Basic meaning structures (image schemata) are generated in the brain through our perception of and movement within the physical world. He argues that the repeated *kol* in the frame of the psalm as well as in verses 7 and 8, is a prominent thematic keyword of the psalm. Coetzee (2006:1137) states:

> All these "alls" group together the earthly works of Yahweh's hands into one large body over which Yahweh's majestic presence rules and over which humankind is appointed to represent Yahweh as king. This prayer, as a religious ritual, presents itself as a medium to facilitate a sense of bodily involvement with Yahweh and with creation.

According to Coetzee (2006:1137) the word "communion" aptly describes such experiences of involvement. When perceiving Yahweh's great creation through the eyes, the psalmist's body transcends itself through awe and prayer.

Two years later, in 2008, Coetzee again highlighted bodily issues in his attempt to interpret Psalm 104. In this study he attempts to show how God-constructs, animal behaviour, and descriptions of nature, as descriptions of Yahweh's history, all refer back to and are metaphorised from human bodily experiences. He argues that human involvement in the "history of Yahweh" appears to be on the same level as the rest of creation in this psalm (Coetzee 2008:298). A key experience of one-bodiedness with the environment in the psalm is that of absorption. The poet experiences his oneness with nature, since he is swallowed up in, and deeply absorbed by the natural landscape around him. At the

same time, the landscape is swallowed into his embodiment, transforming him from within. This almost mystical reading of the psalm suggests that the psalmist's orientation is geocentric and not anthropocentric (Coetzee 2008:301).

In 2007 Coetzee attempted an animal friendly reading of the book of Jonah. He describes his study as an example of reading the Bible against the grain of traditional interpretations in an effort to promote positive changes in our thinking about animals (Coetzee 2007:567). He contends that the purpose of the Jonah story perhaps is to expose to public contempt the mechanisitc view of justice practised by Israel. The author implements a particular form of animal taxonomy to satirise this view of justice. He finds support in the work of Whitekettle (2001:17), who has pointed out that all human communities employ a few basic categories for classifying animals, for example four-legged animals, fish, birds and insects. Coetzee (2007:569) argues that the author of the book of Jonah has such a classification in mind, since the narrative contains references to a dove (1:1 — the meaning of the proper name Jonah); a large fish (2:1, 2, 11); domestic animals (3:7, 8; 4:11); and a worm (4:7). In Jonah's prayer (2:10) implicit reference is made to a sacrificial animal. Coetzee (2007:569) attempts to gain an understanding of the author's thinking about animals and their relationship with God and human beings. He concludes that his animal sensitive reading of the narrative demonstrates that Jonah is ignorant of, and does not care about, animals and of their fate, which illustrates his mechanistic view of justice. The episode in Jonah 3 and God's final comment in Jonah 4:11 in particular confront the reader with questions about animals, and their relationship to God and humans. In the story God includes animals, together with human beings, in his fully integrated creation (Coetzee 2007:583). Therefore, the concept of justice applies to our relationship to (other) animals too. Coetzee aligns himself with the strands of animal theology that are informed by process thinking, evolutionism, and a panentheistic world view (Coetzee 2007:583).

Interestingly, both the very first study in eco-theology by a South African Old Testament scholar (Loader 1987) and the most recent study by P. J. van Dyk, which was published in 2009, focus on the reasons why the Bible has been accused of being hostile or indifferent toward the environment. The same texts came under scrutiny: Gen 1:28 and Ps 8. Twenty years ago Loader offered a response to the accusations, but the purpose of Van Dyk's study is to delve deeper into the accusations themselves. He points out that allegations that the Bible is hostile toward the environment centre in four ideas (Van Dyk 2009:190-195): (1) human domination over the earth, based on the contents of Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 8; (2) patriarchal monotheism, which legitimated the socio-economic development into agricultural communities; (3) the negative concept of wilderness, since in the Bible the desert is described as dreadful, dangerous, and wasteland; and (4) the promise of land, which could be interpreted as promoting the idea that land is a commodity belonging to humans.

Van Dyk (2009:195-196) says that 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 first problem in this regard concerns the observation that neither the term "nature," nor the term "culture" is a biblical concept. Furthermore, one may ask whether biblical texts that put restrictions on the exploitation of natural resources do it primarily for the sake of nature, or for the sake of humans. Van Dyk (2009:196-200) also considers criticism levelled against the Christian tradition which is based on how the Bible was interpreted in the past. Three factors are highlighted: (1) Philosophical viewpoints underlying certain interpretations, for example the harsh dichotomy between the material world as perceived by our sense, and the higher world of Ideas, and the Renaissance philosophy of reason that resulted in the disenchantment of nature; (2) socio-political developments, such as the industrial revolution and colonialism; and (3) theological stumbling blocks, for example the ideas of the salvation of the individual human soul, and the impact of certain eschatological images in the Old Testament may have on theology.

C TENDENCIES, ISSUES AND PROSPECTS

It is significant that eco-theological studies by Old Testament scholars in South Africa have tended to be related to book projects (and to a lesser extent post-graduate research projects). In 1991 seven Old Testament scholars contributed to the volume titled "Mens en Omgewing" ("Human being and Environment"), edited by Vos & Müller. A decade later five studies were inspired by the Earth Bible book project. Thus twelve studies, out of a total of twenty eight, were inspired by only two book projects. (Three further studies were Master's dissertations or Doctoral theses.)

Furthermore, certain requirements set by the editors of the two book projects determined in the first instance the genre of the contributions (all of them contain exegetical material for sermon designs), and in the second instance the hermeneutical stance of the contributors, that is to say, they had to read the biblical texts in terms of six ecojustice principles.

Nearly a decade has elapsed since the second book project. If South African Old Testament scholars would embark on another book project on eco-theology today, it would be significant to know which factors might determine the purpose and focus of the book/series, the selection of contributors, the scope of hermeneutical approaches, *et cetera*.

A second observation concerns the hermeneutical stances reflected by the twenty eight studies involved in this "stock taking" exercise. Paul Ricoeur coined the term "hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval." The earlier eco-theological studies seem to cluster around the "retrieval" element, whereas most of the more recent studies contain a healthy dose of "suspicion" with regard to both the biblical texts and extant interpretations of the texts.

In an essay on the state of the debate in ecological theology, Conradie (2002:27) refers to a number of typologies of ecological theologies. He briefly discusses the typologies of Rosemary Radford Ruether and David Tracy. Ruether suggests that Christian eco-theological studies fall into two different types: *covenantal* and *sacramental*. The covenantal type is popular among Protestant Christians and draws inspiration from the Bible and the convenantal tradition. Covenantal eco-theology emphasises a commitment for right relationships within the earth community. The sacramental type is popular among Catholic Christians and it draws on both the Bible and on patristic and medieval mysticism. It's aim is to speak to the heart, to inspire a vision of the sacred and to express an ecstatic experience of communion within the Earth community. Conradie (2002:27) points out that Ruether's typology mirrors David Tracy's distinction between *prophetic* and *mystic* manifestations of religions in general.

In my view one could combine the two sets of distinctions in an attempt to typify the range of eco-theological studies included in my overview. The studies by F. E. Deist, W. S. Prinsloo, G. T. M. Prinsloo, J. H. Potgieter, L. C. Bezuidenhout, D. Heyns, G. M. Augustyn, H. J. M. van Deventer and L. Maré perhaps exemplify the *covenantal* type, because of their focus on the biblical text and the emphasis on right relationships – even if a theocentric view underlies the arrangement of relationships. In these studies the prophetic element does not feature prominently. However, studies such as those of J. A. Loader, M. J. Masenya, I. J. J. Spangenberg, H. Viviers, M. H. Abdull, F. Klopper, G. H. Wittenberg, P. J. van Dyk, and the present author fit the *prophetic* description better. These studies put a stronger emphasis on the impact of ideology and tend to be more subversive. Although Coetzee and Viviers come from a Protestant background, their bodily interpretations of biblical texts contain a *mystic* element. Their use of the idea of absorption into the large body of earthly creatures and vice versa, comes very close to the idea of an ecstatic experience of communion within the earth community.

Thirdly, the South African Council of Churches recently published a book titled "Climate change — a challenge to the churches in South Africa" (Climate Change Committee 2009). The book emerged from a number of ecumenical consultations and conferences on Christianity and climate change in the Southern African context. The systematic theologian, Ernst Conradie, was instrumental in putting the ideas that emerged from these consultations and conferences in writing. The book (Climate Change Committee 2009:59-61) expresses the need for appropriate theological metaphors that may foster hope and guide our attitudes in the context of the environmental crisis. A number of useful metaphors are suggested, for example liberation, reconstruction, reconciliation, healing, household (*oikos*), stewardship and wisdom. Loader's article on nature and wisdom addresses the relevance of this metaphor in the context of the ecological crisis. Could we as biblical scholars in a similar way enrich

discussions on the possible relevance of the other metaphors, for example the "healing" metaphor? Could biblical scholars rise to the occasion and propose new metaphors?

Fourthly, it should be noted that the studies in my overview highlight a number of issues that require further examination: (1) To what extent are gender issues and Earth issues intertwined? (cf. the study of Masenya on an eco-bosadi approach to ecotheology). (2) If wisdom perspectives and the wisdom metaphor are relevant to eco-theology, can eco-theology also benefit from African wisdom perspectives, as Masenya and Van Heerden suggest by using African proverbs in their studies on Ps 127:3-5 and Eccl 3:16-22 respectively? (3) Could a commitment to eco-theology by theologians of different religious traditions pave the way for meaningful dialogue in a broader sense? (4) How do other societal problems such as poverty, political liberation struggles, and human rights movements impact on ecological matters?

D FINAL WORD

Conradie (2004:126) points out that the emergence of an ecological approach to the study of the Bible was characterised by two tendencies: (a) defending Christiainty against accusations of Lynn White (1967) and several other secular critics who, with reference to certain Bible passages, claimed that the Christian tradition bears a huge burden of guilt for fostering the worldview underlying the present ecological crisis; (b) attempting 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. My overview of emerging eco-theological studies by Old Testament scholars in South Africa the past two decades confirms Conradie's observation. However, in less than two decades other strands of ecotheology that are informed by a much more sceptical attitude towards biblical texts and their interpreters have been offered. Can Old Testament scholarship in South Africa be described as "green"? Perhaps, but only in another sense of the word "green" – fresh on the scene and beginning to find it's way.

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