

Ecotheology: Transforming Biblical Metaphors – A Response to Gunther Wittenberg's Transformation of the Dominion Metaphor

PEET J. VAN DYK (UNISA)

ABSTRACT

As part of a larger debate on ecotheology in South Africa, Gunther Wittenberg suggested that the dominion metaphor in Gen 1:28 and Ps 8 should be transformed to have a less dominating character. In this he followed Vicky Balabanski's idea that a Stoic interpretation of the Christ hymn in Col 1:15-20 could be used as a hermeneutic key to achieve such a transformation. Wittenberg's suggestions that ecotheology should involve more than analysing a few isolated texts and thus become central to biblical theology, that biblical metaphors should be transformed when necessary and that ecotheology should be informed by modern science, are appraised as important markers for doing ecotheology. The success of transforming the dominion metaphor by using the idea of interconnectedness is however questioned because of the fundamental difference between the biological and biblical concepts of interconnectedness. It is further suggested that ecotheology should be linked more deliberately to the larger hermeneutical frameworks of Rudolph Bultmann and Hans-Georg Gadamer when exploring the transformation of biblical metaphors. Finally it is suggested that the biblical concept of wilderness may be a more fruitful metaphor when exploring such transformations.

A CONTINUING THE DEBATE

In 2009 a debate started in *Old Testament Essays* on ecotheology – challenging South African OT scholars to contribute towards this debate.¹ The main problems in the search for a credible ecotheology were identified as follows:

- The fact that the OT does not deal directly with the issues of ecology and conservation and that only a few isolated biblical texts can directly be utilised by theologians to “give a positive spin” on ecological issues.

¹ Cf. Peet J. van Dyk, “Challenges in Search for an Ecotheology,” *OTE* 22/1 (2009): 186-204; Peet J. van Dyk, “Eco-Theology and Losing the Sacred,” *OTE* 23/3 (2010): 822-833; and Gunther Wittenberg, “In Search of the Right Metaphor: A Response to Peet van Dyk’s ‘Challenges in the Search for an Ecotheology.’ Part One: Metaphor and Dominion,” *OTE* 23/2 (2010): 427-53; Gunther Wittenberg, “In Search of the Right Metaphor: A Response to Peet van Dyk’s ‘Challenges in the Search for an Ecotheology.’ Part Two: Searching for an Alternative,” *OTE* 23/3 (2010): 889-912.

- The negative impact anthropocentric tendencies, both within the OT text and prevalent within the history of OT interpretation, had had on conservation.² This problem centres on the forcefulness of the dominion metaphor in Gen 1:28 and Ps 8 and its potential encouragement of human hubris, especially when dealing with nature.³
- The negative perception of the wilderness in the OT as a place that is not only viewed as hostile towards human habitation (and therefore regarded as undesirable), but also as an area filled with evil and dangerous creatures and inhabited by robbers and vagabonds only.⁴
- The negative impact ancient cultural concepts within the Bible may have on ecological hermeneutics. These include patriarchal monotheism⁵ and the view of the promised land as a commodity.⁶
- Traditional biblical interpretation, which has been influenced by various philosophical traditions (e.g. Plato's dualism), the "disenchantment of nature" during the Renaissance, the neglect of creation theology in favour of salvation history, the theology of the fall and the curse of the land and the development of late twentieth century millennialism – all of which tended towards the "slighting" of everything material, including nature.⁷
- Socio-political influences on the way we regard nature, including colonialism and the industrial revolution and the way in which traditional theology tended to uncritically legitimise these environmentally damaging processes.⁸

² Cf. Norman C. Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (eds. Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger; Leiden: Brill, 2008): 4: "First, we begin reading with the suspicion that the text is likely to be *inherently* anthropocentric and/or has *traditionally been read* from an anthropocentric perspective ..." (emphasis mine).

³ Van Dyk, "Challenges," 190-2.

⁴ Robert Leal, "Negativity Towards Wilderness in the Biblical Record," *Ecotheology* 10/3 (2005): 368-375.

⁵ Jared M. Diamond, "The Environmentalist Myth in Archaeology," *Nature* 324/6 (1986): 19-20.

⁶ Richard H. Hiers, "Ecology, Biblical Theology, and Methodology: Biblical Perspectives on the Environment," *Zygon* 19/1 (1984): 43-59.

⁷ Cf. Van Dyk, "Challenges," 196-8.

⁸ Norman C. Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible," in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (ed. Norman C. Habel; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 30.

Taking up the challenge to participate in the debate on ecotheology, Gunther Wittenberg focused primarily on the so-called dominion metaphor in Gen 1:28 and Ps 8 and suggested that it could be transformed into a less dominating metaphor.⁹ In his two-series article he followed the suggestion by Vicky Balabanski¹⁰ that the Stoic interpretation of Col 1:15-20 could be used to transform the metaphor.

The purpose of this article is to discuss Wittenberg's suggestions critically regarding the possible transformation of the biblical dominion metaphor and to prepare the way for a wider discussion on the question of if and how biblical metaphors can be transformed successfully, by suggesting that the wilderness metaphor in the Bible may be a more fruitful example. This second aspect will be discussed in "Part Two: From wilderness to home" of this two-part series of articles on transforming biblical metaphors.

First we will give an overview of Wittenberg's suggestion of how the dominion metaphor could be transformed and then evaluate the positive and negative aspects of his suggestions.

B TRANSFORMING THE DOMINION METAPHOR

In his two thought provoking articles Gunther Wittenberg suggests that rather than trying to "whitewash" or totally abandon the biblical metaphor of dominion over nature, the metaphor should be *transformed*.¹¹ He argues that by transforming the dominion metaphor scholars can retain their link to both the original biblical metaphor and to the Christian theological tradition. This would not be the case with the non-biblical metaphors suggested by the Earth-Bible project (i.e., "earth as voice")¹² and that of Sallie McFague (i.e., "world as God's

⁹ Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part One" and "Metaphor, Part Two."

¹⁰ Vicky Balabanski, "Critiquing Anthropocentric Cosmology: Retrieving a Stoic 'Permeation Cosmology' in Colossians 1:15-20," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 151-9.

¹¹ Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part One," 427-53; and "Metaphor, Part Two," 889-912. The importance of using metaphorical language in enhancing our understanding through comparison is well known to scholars of literature and need no further explanation, cf. Peet J. van Dyk, "Significant versus Symbolic Universes – Sorting out the Terminology," *JSem* 20/2 (2011): 426-427. The crucial question here is to what extent the metaphor should be appropriate to that which it tries to explain. Although symbol and that which is symbolised may differ in many respects, the point of comparison should not fundamentally differ between the two, or the metaphor will be unsuccessful.

¹² Habel, "Earth Bible," 27.

body").¹³ However, the dominion metaphor can, according to him, only be retained after it has been transformed by getting rid of its oppressive royal ideology and if it is no longer interpreted in terms of a hierarchical dualism.¹⁴

To achieve this transformation Wittenberg utilises the so-called Christ hymn of Col 1:15-20 as a kind of "hermeneutic key" to reinterpret the dominion metaphor so that it could no longer be misused to suggest that humans can forcefully exploit nature in the way a king could dominate his subjects.¹⁵ He further agrees with Balabanski's suggestion that the dominant dualistic and anthropocentric interpretation of the Christ hymn should be replaced by a more appropriate Stoic interpretation (i.e., panentheistic), which reckons with a "unified cosmos, which is held together by a rational agent."¹⁶ This rational agent can be equated with Nature, while Nature then becomes just another way of referring to God.¹⁷

If understood against its Stoic background the Christ hymn in Colossians emphasises the interconnectedness of all things in the sense that all "cosmic entities derive their order and being" as well as their coherence from the "continued existence in Christ." This interconnectedness of all things is expressed by the biblical theology of cosmic reconciliation in Christ.¹⁸ Although Christ has dominion over nature this dominion is not dominance from outside as its Lord and Master, but dominion in the sense that Christ is part of the "cosmic body" of which he is the head.¹⁹ What makes this interconnectedness of the Christ hymn appealing to Wittenberg (following a suggestion by Sally McFague²⁰) is the fact that it agrees with one of the fundamental insights of modern science that humans are part of nature (not over and above it) and that they are "intricately connected with nature as part of the web of life."²¹

C POSITIVE ASPECTS OF WITTENBERG'S SUGGESTIONS

A number of Wittenberg's suggestions are not only appealing, but also shows the way forward for ecological hermeneutics (and other similarly "thorny" issues such as racism, feminism and various social and political issues – espe-

¹³ Sallie McFague, "Imaging a Theology of Nature as God's Body," in *Liberating Life. Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology* (ed. Charles Birch, William Eakin and James B. McDaniel; Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1990), 201-227.

¹⁴ Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part 2," 897.

¹⁵ Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part Two," 828; and Van Dyk, "Challenges," 190-192.

¹⁶ Balabanski, "Anthropocentric Cosmology," 154-159.

¹⁷ Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part Two," 898-900.

¹⁸ Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part Two," 904.

¹⁹ Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part Two," 910.

²⁰ McFague, "Imaging," 201-227.

²¹ Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part Two," 890.

cially when these topics are not directly addressed by the biblical text). The following suggestions by Wittenberg should be commended:

- Wittenberg follows the suggestion by John Cobb²² that eco-theologians are not interested in producing just another theology, that is, one of many other theologies with which it has to compete.²³ Eco-theologians cannot be satisfied with dealing with only a few isolated texts, which may have some remote bearing on conservation issues, or with traditional theological interpretations of the biblical text. Ecotheology therefore does not want to be on the fringes of "main stream" theology, but wants to directly relate to a core element of biblical theology, that is, what Wittenberg identifies as "resistance theology."²⁴
- Wittenberg's approach accepts that some biblical metaphors may not be the "right metaphors for our time" and should therefore either be abandoned or at least be transformed. In his articles he chooses the latter option and uses a "core part" of the biblical message (the Christ hymn in Colossians) as a hermeneutical key to transform the "less desirable" aspects of the dominion metaphor into a metaphor that deliberately deals with the interconnectedness of all elements on earth.²⁵ Although the linkage of the Colossians concept with the modern scientific concept of the interconnectedness of the ecosystem, is problematic (see below), the idea that biblical metaphors often need to be transformed for a contemporary audience, is an important idea that should be pursued further by eco-theologians specifically and theologians in general.²⁶
- The suggestion by Wittenberg that any theology of nature (including ecotheology) should be informed by modern science and that eco-theologians should therefore be "ecologically literate" is an important prerequisite for any theologian who regards him or herself as part of a

²² John B. Cobb, "The Role of Theology of Nature in the Church," in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology* (ed. Charles Birch, William Eakin and Jay B. McDaniel; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990), 261-272.

²³ Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part One," 431.

²⁴ Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part One," 432.

²⁵ The full hermeneutical implications and possible problems with such transformation of biblical metaphors will need more future attention.

²⁶ Although Wittenberg does not attempt to relate this idea to either Bultmann or Gadamer their hermeneutics may be useful for Ecotheology. Cf. Rudolph Bultmann, "The Mythological Element in the Message of the New Testament and the Problem of its Re-Interpretation Part1," n.p. [cited 2 August 2010]. Online: <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=431&C=292>; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd rev. ed.; trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall; London: Sheed & Ward, 1989).

larger scientific community. Herein Wittenberg follows McFague²⁷ (quoting Capra) in suggesting that the interconnectedness of nature (including humans) could offer such a shared point of departure for natural scientists and eco-theologians.²⁸ That eco-theologians should be ecologically literate is an important point to make, especially in the light of the unfortunate fact that many theologians display the most superficial and popularly-informed knowledge of both evolutionary biology and the basic concepts of the ecosystem.²⁹ The related suggestion that ecotheology should be compatible with scientific concepts is however a more complex hermeneutical problem (see below).

Notwithstanding the many positive elements in Wittenberg's suggestions it is nonetheless imperative that they should be closely scrutinised and evaluated in the light of larger hermeneutical issues.

D CRITICISM OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND PURPOSE

Wittenberg's proposal of how to transform the dominion metaphor closely follows the ecojustice principles as set out by the Earth Bible project of Norman Habel and associates, and more specifically as applied to the text of Col 1:15-20 by Vicky Balabanski.³⁰ For our purposes we will focus on three of the six ecojustice principles, underlying both Wittenberg's and Balabanski's analyses – being principles 2, 4 and a part of 5:

- **Principle 2:** "The principle of interconnectedness: Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependant on each other for life and survival."
- **Principle 4:** "The principle of purpose: The universe, Earth and all its components are part of a dynamic *cosmic design* within which each piece has a place in the overall *goal* of that design."
- **Principle 5:** "Earth is a *balanced* and diverse domain ..." (emphases mine).³¹

On the surface these three principles look acceptable (especially to theologians) and the fact that they were compiled in association with the late Aus-

²⁷ McFague, "Imaging," 201-227.

²⁸ Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part 1," 433.

²⁹ Cf. Peet J. van Dyk, "Evolusie: Die Misverstand tussen Teologie en Biologie," *HTS* 49/1&2 (1993): 281-295.

³⁰ Habel, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 2; Balabanski, "Anthropocentric Cosmology," 151-9.

³¹ Habel, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 2.

tralian ecologist Charles Birch,³² apparently gives them scientific credibility. Unfortunately this is not necessarily the case, because the ideas forwarded by Birch, and further propagated by the ecojustice principles of the Earth Bible project, fly directly in the face of what "main stream"³³ biologists hold to be true.

Principle 2, regarding the interconnectedness and mutual dependency of all communities within the ecosystem, is on its own correct and not to be challenged. However, when read within the context of principle 4 (the principle of purpose) it may lose its neutral character and become part of an overarching argument which proposes a form of historicism. Historicism is a philosophy of history that holds that history is at least to some extent predictable because it has a definite and identifiable purpose or goal, directing its developing. Hegel's philosophy of history is just one example of such a teleological view of history.³⁴ The idea that nature (like history) also has an identifiable purpose, directing its development, is a very old view that was already expounded in great detail in the late 1700s and early 1800s by proponents of so-called Natural Theology, for example, William Paley.³⁵ Paley was the first person to introduce the metaphor of a watchmaker – comparing the way in which a watch is manufactured from a preconceived template, with the way God designed and created the cosmos. Paley then reversed the metaphor by arguing that this identifiable and preconceived plan of the universe can act as proof that there should be some kind of intelligent or divine design behind the cosmos.

³² Cf. Charles Birch, *Nature and God* (London: SCM, 1965); Charles Birch, *On Purpose* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1990).

³³ The term "main stream" is basically a subjective call and difficult to substantiate. It is, however, a call scientists constantly are forced to make when selecting some sources as being more authoritative or important than others, while some views may be judged to belong to the fringes of science. Exactly how disastrous the lack of such a differentiation could be, was tragically illustrated by the South African government of former president Thabo Mbeki, when they chose to elevate to Gospel the divergent view of some fringe "scientists" (sic!), who advocated the view that Aids was not caused by the HI virus. The direct result from this misguided judgement was that approximately 330 000 people in South Africa died because ARVs were not made available to them. Cf. Salim S. Abdool Karim and Cheryl Baxter, "Introduction," in *HIV/AIDS in South Africa* (ed. Salim S. Abdool Karim and Q. Abdool Karim; Cape Town: Cambridge, 2010), 37-44.

³⁴ Cf. Daniel Little, "Philosophy of History," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), n.p. [cited 9 November 2011], (ed. Edward N. Zalta). Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/history/>; Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), 105-6. Although historicism is regarded by many scholars as an outdated view, this does not necessarily mean it is not still consciously or unconsciously used as a frame of reference.

³⁵ William Paley, *Natural Theology* (London: Richard Griffen, n.d.).

Although this teleological concept of historicism has been severely criticised by *inter alia* Karl Popper³⁶ and Talcott Parsons,³⁷ it has nonetheless remained a much cherished view amongst theologians. The main criticism against historicism is that it tries to identify a main strand or course within history or nature by reducing an infinite amount of data to a manageable single strand. This necessarily implies a pre-chosen purpose towards which history or nature is supposed to be developing (e.g. progression towards some socio-political, psychological, ethical or natural feature) and some serious "cherry-picking" (i.e., choosing only the best, or what suits one's purpose, while ignoring all other data to the contrary).³⁸ The circularity of such arguments and the complete inability of biologists to demonstrate convincingly and in practical terms what so-called biological progression may involve, have been argued in great detail by the famous biologist George C. Williams.³⁹

When "main line" evolutionary biologists⁴⁰ therefore speak of the interconnectedness of the ecosystem they do NOT wish to imply any purpose or *preconceived* direction in such development. One of the most fundamental assumptions of modern evolutionary science is that nature is entirely the result of a twofold process: 1) random processes such as genetic mutation (i.e., chance); and 2) feedback mechanisms from the environment, which are not due to chance (e.g. natural selection). It is these feedback mechanisms which may direct development, but not in the sense of a preconceived goal.⁴¹ This kind of design is therefore not to be confused with so-called intelligent design, necessitating a higher supernatural force, directing nature towards a preconceived

³⁶ Popper, *Poverty of Historicism*, 21-32.

³⁷ Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers*, (2nd ed.; New York: Free Press, 1968).

³⁸ One favourite example from natural history is to emphasise the advantages of predation, while completely ignoring the *unnecessary* cruelty which often goes with it. Cf. Stephen J. Gould, "Nonmoral Nature," in *Great essays in science* (ed. Martin Gardner; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 34-45.

³⁹ George C. Williams, *Adaptation and Natural Selection: A Critique of Some Current Evolutionary Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966). Also see Peet J. van Dyk, *A Brief History of Creation* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2001), 157-164.

⁴⁰ E.g. Williams, *Adaptation*, 35-53 and Gould, "Nonmoral nature," 34-45.

⁴¹ It is one of the most common mistakes by theologians and creationists to assume that biologists are suggesting that evolution takes place purely by chance – thus ignoring the non-random feedback mechanisms of natural selection which are an essential part of evolution as viewed by biologists. Cf. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), 119: "No indeed, chance is not the likely designer. That is one thing on which we can all agree."

purpose or end – as teleologically inclined theologians would assume.⁴² It is on this point that evolutionary biologists and theologians misunderstand each other most commonly.⁴³

Balabanski's and Wittenberg's Stoic interpretation of Colossians is in my view probably correct, but the problem lies in the attempt to equate this biblical teleological idea with the idea of interconnectedness in modern biology. It may imply that modern science agrees with the historicist idea of the Bible that the cosmos has a rational design (intelligent design), not only binding it together, but also directing it towards its ultimate purpose.⁴⁴

This concept of intelligent design or interconnectedness as expressed by Colossians is, however, fundamentally different from the biological theory regarding the interconnectedness of the ecosystem and its associated evolutionary development. Evolutionary biologists are not only extremely sceptical about any idea of predesigned progression towards an identifiable end purpose,⁴⁵ but they also doubt the so-called intricate balance of nature,⁴⁶ so often used by theologians to argue for the built-in divine order and wisdom within nature (versus the ecojustice Principle 5).

If nature (and history for that matter) has NO *demonstrable*⁴⁷ purpose (contrary to the liking of historicism), then one may rightly ask how nature could have any theological implications or lessons. To deliberately choose the interconnectedness of the cosmic elements as an hermeneutic key for ecotheology, because it *inter alia* is supposed to agree with the results from natural sci-

⁴² Richard Dawkins, *The Blind watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1986) and Richard Dawkins, *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* (London: Bantam, 2009), 357-71, has forwarded a number of convincing arguments in this regard.

⁴³ Cf. Van Dyk, "Evolusie Misverstand," 281-295.

⁴⁴ Cf. Wittenberg, "Metaphor, Part Two," 900: "*Stoics understand the world as a unified cosmos, which is held together by a rational agent, Nature, physics, which is the ultimate cause of all things. As such, Nature is another way of referring to God.*" Further on page 904: "*The idea that the cosmic entities derive their order and being and that the coherence of the cosmos is ensured by its continuous existence in Christ (en auto), is stressed in Col 1:17b.*" See also page 906: "*The reconciliation by Christ of the entire cosmos ... is the ultimate divine purpose.*"

⁴⁵ Cf. Williams, *Adaptation*, 35-53.

⁴⁶ Cf. Stuart L. Pimm, *The Balance of Nature? Ecological Issues in the Conservation of Species and Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.)

⁴⁷ The term "demonstrable" here implies that such a design and purpose in nature can be demonstrated in a convincing scientific way by using the accepted methods of observation and logic. However, I do not want to negate the possibility that one may believe in such an end purpose for the cosmos. What is problematic is when one tries to demonstrate or prove what this purpose is through science. Cf. Dawkins, *Delusion*, 75-110 for examples of such attempts to prove God's existence.

ence, would therefore not only be misleading, but also untenable in the light of the fact that the interconnectedness assumed by science has no link whatsoever to the interconnectedness of Colossians or that of intelligent design. The idea that ecotheology should and can be compatible with the most basic assumptions of modern natural science (as argued by McFague and agreed to by Wittenberg) is nothing less than suggesting that faith can be proven and that scientific results can in some way be used to strengthen one's faith.⁴⁸

I would therefore like to argue that the interdependence and relatedness of the whole biosphere has no theological implications whatsoever, because this interconnectedness in nature has been the outcome of a purely natural process of evolution and has not (in any *demonstrable* way) been the result of divine causation or pre-ordained order. To try and deduce theological principles (as Natural Theology tried to do) from the interconnectedness of the ecosystem would raise the following problems:

- Why do eco-theologians (and other theologians) focus on the positive aspects of such interconnectedness only? What about the negative results flowing directly from this interconnectedness of all living and non-living elements in the biosphere? Is it not exactly the interconnectedness of the food web, which necessitates that some individuals must kill and eat others in order to survive? Surely this cannot be viewed in an ethical positive way, but at the most as a neutral necessity of biological life? This argument is especially compelling when one also considers the unnecessary cruelty that often goes hand in hand with some forms of parasitism and predation.⁴⁹
- If biological interconnectedness implies nothing more than the fact that damage to one part of the ecosystem can cause devastating (and sometimes irreparable) damage to other parts, then it has no theological implications. It merely confirms the natural system of cause and effect,

⁴⁸ Although all comparisons between the Bible and the results of natural science does not necessarily imply that the author is trying to prove his or her faith with the help of scientific results, one should nonetheless regard such comparisons with the necessary suspicion. For example, why does one want to compare scientific results about the origin of life with the biblical creation narratives? It may be an innocent remark for interest sake, but in many cases it may be a conscious or unconscious attempt to synchronise science and faith. Such an attempt would drastically differ from Kierkegaard's idea of what faith entails. See Jiou Lee-Yang, "Philosopher of the Month September 2001 – Soren Kierkegaard," n.p. [cited 9 November 2011]. Online: http://www.philosophers.co.uk/cafe/phil_sep2001.htm, for a summary of Kierkegaard's definition of faith: "*What characterises a leap of faith is the absolute uncertainty that underlies it. Faith is by definition that which cannot be proven or disproved. That is why a leap of faith is undertaken in 'fear and trembling.'*"

⁴⁹ Cf. Gould, "Nonmoral nature," 34-45.

where all interconnected elements influence each other. Wilful and avoidable damage to one element of the ecosystem is also not wrong in the first place, because it may also damage other connected elements. Such wilful damage would be wrong even if damage to one part does not necessarily result in damage to other parts or to the whole. For example, to participate in trophy hunting of impala antelope (one of the commonest antelopes in Africa) may have a negligible impact on the ecosystem as a whole, at least when conducted in a limited and contained way. However, this does not necessarily make such trophy hunting ethically acceptable, especially when it is conducted as a sport only and not for culling or other purposes. To pose the question in a different way: Is it the possible cascading biological disaster (i.e. domino effect), which makes damage to one element of the ecosystem wrong, or is any wilful and unnecessary damage to the ecosystem, even when limited, in principle wrong?⁵⁰

- A last problematic aspect of the interconnectedness argument is the possibility that it may be just another masked anthropocentric argument. Is the implication behind this emphasis on the interconnectedness of the ecosystem not that if one damages a non-human element of the ecosystem it may also cause harm to humans? If this is the real motive behind the interconnectedness argument, it will introduce just another form of the anthropocentric argument, which eco-theologians are trying so desperately to eliminate from the ecotheology debate.

In summary, the suggestion that Christ is the rational and ordering principle behind all nature may be part of the teleological view of the Bible, but the idea that any purpose could rationally be demonstrated in the course of nature or evolution is not part of post-Enlightenment science⁵¹ – notwithstanding the popularity of the idea amongst some theologians and the general public. Although I agree that eco-theologians should be scientifically literate, this does not imply that they should try and reconcile faith and science in a rational way.

E CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the above arguments I think Wittenberg's association of the spiritual interconnectedness in Christ, with the physical interconnectedness in nature is not only suspect, but undesirable. Wittenberg's "hermeneutic key" of

⁵⁰ This is of course not to negate the argument that such a cascading biological disaster would cause more harm and thus, in terms of a fuzzy system of ethics, would be more wrong than isolated damage to a relatively insignificant part of the system. Cf. Bart Kosko, *Fuzzy Thinking: The New Science of Fuzzy Logic* (London: Flamingo, 1994), 256-261.

⁵¹ Versus Birch, *Nature and God*, and Birch, *On Purpose*.

interconnectedness, with which he wants to transform the biblical metaphor of domination into something more benevolent, can therefore not be regarded as successful.

This begs the larger question: How successful can biblical metaphors be transformed into more positive metaphors to support contemporary ecological concerns?⁵² To answer this question and to take Wittenberg's quest for the best metaphor one step further, one need to first directly address the following hermeneutic issues:

- Is it desirable or necessary for modern exegetes to sometimes transform or even reject a specific biblical metaphor? Often *some* biblical scholars rather naively assume that ecological, feminist or democratic perspectives can be found in the Bible,⁵³ if only it is read from the appropriate perspective and if traditional interpretations of the Bible are regarded with suspicion as being biased. Although this goes without further arguing, the more pressing question is: What should we do when the Bible flatly contradicts or ignores our current scientific cosmology and sensibilities regarding conservation, equal rights for the sexes and our views of democracy? Too often biblical scholars merely state that it may be desirable for biblical scholars to transform biblical metaphors or read against the grain of the text⁵⁴ without considering the hermeneutic and theological implications of such a view.
- On what basis can one reject or transform a biblical metaphor without falling into the trap of subjective "cherry picking"? To *arbitrarily* accept, reject, transform biblical metaphors or read against the grain of the biblical text to suit one's own (modern) views, would be unscientific in the extreme. Although it is acknowledged that it is the ethical duty of biblical scholars to sometimes "resist" biblical metaphors, this cannot be done in an arbitrary fashion, but should be based on some (biblical?) hermeneutical key or framework.
- If it is accepted that some agreed-upon hermeneutic key (such as Balabanski's and Wittenberg's key of interconnectedness) could be used, it begs the further question if such a hermeneutic key should come

⁵² The same question can also be asked in terms of feminist, democratic and other humanistic ideals.

⁵³ This is not to imply that all (or even the majority) of eco-theological, feminist or social scholars adhere to this naïve view.

⁵⁴ Cf. David J. A. Clines, "Images of Yahweh: God in the Pentateuch," in *Studies in Old Testament Theology* (ed. Robert L. Hubbard, Robert K. Johnston, and Robert P. Meyer. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992), 79-98.

from the Bible, from our contemporary society, or from both.⁵⁵ If such a hermeneutic key should come primarily from the Bible, but be informed by the issues of our contemporary society, it assumes that we are operating with a canon within a canon (in accordance with the Lutheran view) and that some agreement needs to be reached on what exactly this authoritative centre of the Bible is.⁵⁶

- Exactly how a transformation of biblical metaphors should be done further needs to be clarified by referring to specific hermeneutic models, for example, Bultmann's⁵⁷ proposal for "*entmythologisierung*" and Gadamer's⁵⁸ suggestion that the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader should be fused into a new horizon to discover the meaning of the text. It is not sufficient to make *ad hoc* suggestions about transformation without considering the larger hermeneutic picture when suggesting such a transformation.

In conclusion it can be said that Wittenberg's suggestion that biblical metaphors should be transformed within a larger protest framework, is a proposal that should be followed up by eco-theologians and it is suggested that the wilderness metaphor may be a more fruitful metaphor to transform than the dominion metaphor in Gen 1:28 and Ps 8. The reasons for choosing the wilderness as the focus of Part Two of this series (i.e., "Ecotheology: Transforming Biblical Metaphors. Part Two: From Wilderness to Home") are as follows:

- The importance of the wilderness concept in contemporary ecological debates.
- The similarities and differences between the way the wilderness was perceived in the OT and how it was seen in the history of Western thought.

⁵⁵ Although a non-biblical hermeneutic key can of course be used to transform biblical metaphors, one should ask the question how this may impact on the perceived authority of the Bible: If the Bible can only become acceptable to modern people after it has been transformed (i.e. changed) to agree with modern eco-theological, feminist and social and democratic ideals (all of them of the highest importance) then one can rightly ask the question why we still need the Bible at all.

⁵⁶ This raises the further hermeneutical question of how successful one can identify a centre for the Bible. Cf. Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (rev. and updated ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), see ch. 4: The Center of the OT and OT Theology.

⁵⁷ Bultmann, "The Mythological Element," <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=431&C=292>.

⁵⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 292.

- The ambivalence humans often feel towards the wilderness may provide a fruitful background to explore the theological significance of the wilderness concept.

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Prof. Peet J. van Dyk, Department of Bible and Ancient Studies, Unisa. Pretoria. Email: vdykpj1@unisa.ac.za.