Eco-Theology: In and out of the Wilderness

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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that any attempt by eco-theologians to interpret the biblical concept of the wilderness in a more positive light, would be futile. However, by stripping the biblical wilderness metaphor from its magico-mythical assumptions, new meaning can be constructed by applying general biblical ethics such as loving one's neighbor as oneself to the wilderness. Often this will involve reading against the grain of biblical texts dealing with the wilderness, but this should only challenge us to go beyond the text and measure it against the core ethical principles of the Bible. Without caring for the wilderness, we jeopardize the livelihood of future generations and deny them the possibility of enjoying the psychological and aesthetical benefits of the wilderness.

KEYWORDS: Wilderness; Cosmology; Hermeneutics; Love your neighbor; Biblical ethics; Transforming metaphors.

A   THE PROBLEM WITH ECO-THEOLOGY

Constructing an eco-theology from biblical texts is extraordinarily complex and by no means a straightforward process. To say anything meaningful about ecology and the Bible entails a total rethinking of biblical hermeneutics. The reason for this is because the Judeo-Christian Bible says very little about nature and the environment[1] and in those cases that it does allude to the natural world, the Bible is largely indifferent or even hostile towards its well-being.[2]

This fact has led to the unfortunate situation where many eco-theologians (in their over-eagerness to discover something positive in the Bible about nature) have resorted to some serious cherry-picking, wishful-thinking and to what natural scientists would call story-telling. In extreme cases, some eco-theologians have even reverted to a kind of neo-paganist imagery in their desperate attempts

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[1]   Richard H. Hiers, "Ecology, Biblical Theology and Methodology," *Zygon* 19/1 (1984): 23; Gene M. Tucker, "Creation and the Limits of the World: Nature and History in the Old Testament," *HBT* 15 (1993): 23.
[2]   Robert B. Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible: Toward a Theology of Wilderness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 23.

to give the earth and its inhabitants a voice.[3] Speaking about "Earth" or "mother earth" in a metaphorical sense, as if she were a conscious being, is not necessarily a problem. However, in some cases the usage of these metaphors borders on a revival of animistic beliefs, where elements of nature (both animate and inanimate) are believed to have indwelling spirits that can "speak" to us or can be addressed by humans.[4]

It therefore is not surprising that many "mainstream" theologians have either refused to take eco-theology seriously, or at least have declined to participate in it. But all is not necessarily lost. In a sense, this apparent *cul-de-sac* in eco-theology is fortuitous, because it compels us to drastically rethink biblical hermeneutics—which is long overdue.[5] I would like to suggest that this rethinking can be achieved by way of a cosmological interpretation of the biblical text within the broader framework of Gadamer's hermeneutics.[6] The purpose of this article is to explore how a cosmological exegesis of the Bible can aid theologians in constructing eco-theology. The biblical concept of the wilderness is used as an example.

B   A COSMOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

In its broadest sense, a cosmology can be defined as the sum of a community's shared beliefs and assumptions about the world. A cosmology thus acts as a broad conceptual framework in terms of which people interpret reality.[7] Cosmology (i.e. worldview or *Weltanschauung*) is therefore a mental picture or construct that expresses our beliefs of how the cosmos originated, what it looks like (e.g. is structured) and how the cosmos functions (i.e. the system of causes and effects). Naugle described the importance of a cosmology or worldview as follows:

> After all, what could be more important or influential than the way an individual, a family, a community, a nation, or an entire culture conceptualizes reality? Is there anything more profound or powerful than the shape and content of human consciousness and its primary interpretation of the nature of things? When it comes to the deepest questions about human life and existence, does anything surpass the final

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[3]   Cf. Nicola H. Creegan, "Theological Foundations of the Ecological Crisis," *Stim* 12/4 (2004): 31-33.

[4]   Creegan, "Theological Foundations," 31-33.

[5]   This problem with biblical exegesis is *inter alia* suggested by the extreme fragmentation of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics into various schools of interpretation, with very little communication taking place between them.

[6]   Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 23.

[7]   J.C. Van der Merwe, "The Relevance of Worldview Interpretation to Health Care in South Africa," in *Health Knowledge and Belief Systems in Africa*, ed. Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2008), 57.

implications of the answers supplied by one's essential *Weltanschau-ung*?[8]

The mental picture of a cosmology is partly constructed or based on human observation of the natural and social world, and partly based on pre-existing knowledge or templates. "Naked" facts are not accessible to the human mind. All observations are partly determined by our human lenses or templates.[9] Observations are therefore never one hundred per cent accurate, especially when conclusions are based on insufficient and casual rather than scientifically controlled observations. As such, cosmologies (both pre-scientific and scientific ones) are constructed based on a mixture of correct and incorrect observations and conclusions.

What is important about constructs such as cosmologies is that they are not only a conglomerate of observations, built into a convenient theory or mental structure, but that they function as paradigms that *partly* determine not only our thinking, but also our further observations.[10] A cosmology therefore consists of a set of assumptions and biases that guide our thoughts and makes it difficult (but not impossible) to think outside this "referential box."[11]

Cosmologies are the result of a two-way process which is, on the one hand, sparked by the impact of "reality" on our mind and, on the other hand, is molded by our thought processes. Cosmologies are never one hundred per cent neat and consistent (even in the case of scientific cosmologies) but they are also not necessarily completely irreconcilable with other competing paradigms (versus Kuhn's earlier concept of incommensurability).[12]

Although the smaller details within a cosmology may differ from culture to culture and from time to time, it is possible to classify all cosmologies into two broad categories:

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[8]   David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2002), 345.

[9]   Ellen. J. Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition, and Context* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 23.

[10]   Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 23.

[11]   As a critical realist, operating within a fuzzy logical framework, the author believes that it would be a mistake to assume (like some extreme forms of Marxism do) that our cosmologies are entirely built from the "bottom upwards," that is, completely determined by materialistic reality. On the other hand, a completely relativistic post-modernist epistemological framework would argue that constructs are entirely determined by our paradigms (built from the top down).

[12]   John Hassard, "Overcoming Hermeticism in Organization Theory: An Alternative to Paradigm Incommensurability," *HRel* 41/3 (1988): 247-59; Howard Sankey, "Kuhn's Changing Concept of Incommensurability," *BJPhSc* 44/4 (1993): 759-74.

(i)   *Magico-mythical cosmologies*, which existed in ancient cultures and persist to this day in some non-Westernized and pre-scientific communities. These magico-mythical cosmologies are fundamentally religious in nature (i.e. includes supernatural forces – also magical ones – as part of a system of causes and effects) and includes not only beliefs about the natural world, but also about the structure of society;[13] and

(ii)   *Scientific cosmologies*, which deliberately exclude supernatural causes as explanations for physical phenomena. Proto-scientific cosmologies were already developed by classical Greek philosophers, with their increasing emphasis on natural rather than supernatural causes, and observation rather than "story-telling." Our current scientific cosmology only became the dominant one within the educated world during the Renaissance/Enlightenment. The Renaissance/ Enlightenment was a deliberate effort to replace – what were called at the time – the ignorance and "superstitions" embedded within the magico-mythical cosmology.[14]

When modern (post-Renaissance) readers therefore read ancient or prescientific texts such as the Bible, there is an inevitable clash of cosmologies between reader and text; that is, between the reader's scientific cosmology versus the magico-mythical cosmology of the text. This is because these two cosmologies differ fundamentally – not only in terms of how they picture the universe, but especially in how they see the functioning of the cosmos.[15]

These largely contradictory cosmologies may not only cause gross misinterpretations of the ancient biblical texts by modern readers, but in many cases, render the ancient biblical texts meaningless (or irrelevant) to contemporary readers. This implies that if the cosmological assumptions of the text and the cosmology of the readers cannot in some way be fused, the biblical texts become obsolete. A similar situation existed in Ancient Greece when the philosophers found it impossible to read the Greek mythologies – for example, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey – in a literal way and therefore began to interpret them in a symbolic way.[16]

Broadly following Gadamer's notion that hermeneutics should consist of the fusing of the horizon of the text with the horizon of the reader,[17] one can

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[13]   The mistaken idea that the magico-mythical cosmology is limited only to some cosmogonic and poetic texts in the OT is based on a too narrow and outdated definition of myths.

[14]   Peter Gay, *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, vol. 1 of *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), 34.

[15]   John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

[16]   Gadamer, *Truth*, 73.

[17]   Gadamer, *Truth*, 23.

strike a balance between the now fashionable reader-response exegetical methods and the older historico-critical interpretations by giving a voice to both the reader and the text. Gadamer maintains that meaning can only be *constructed* by first *reconstructing* (my term) the voice of the text and then by relating this to the voice of the contemporary reader – fully realizing that it would only be partly possible to fuse the two.

But what is meant by the term horizon? The term can either be interpreted in a narrow sense (e.g. as the perspective of the text/reader in terms of patriarchy, slavery, etc.), or in a broader sense as a perspective including a number of related perspectives built into a system of understanding. In the latter sense of the word (the broadest possible definition), the term would largely overlap with the overarching construct of a cosmology or worldview.

The importance for biblical exegetes to consistently take the conflicting cosmologies of the text versus that of the reader seriously can *inter alia* be illustrated by the divergence between the views of the ancient text versus that of modern readers with regard to the concept of wilderness.

C   WILDERNESS

The OT has no equivalent concept to our modern concept of nature.[18] The concept of wilderness is probably the closest alternative, which can possibly link the biblical text with our modern appreciation of nature. However, this is exactly where the problem lies. Our contemporary positive appreciation of the wilderness radically differs from the picture painted in the Bible about the wilderness, and this fact is partly to be attributed to the different cosmologies of the text versus the cosmology of the contemporary reader.[19]

1   Our modern concept of wilderness

As suggested above, our current preoccupation with the environment and nature conservation – which was long overdue – is closely linked to our concepts of nature and wilderness. When we say that we want to preserve nature, it does not mean that we only want to preserve the natural processes within nature, but also that we would like to preserve the wilderness itself. This is because it is especially in the wilderness where these natural processes can proceed without unduly interference from humans.

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[18]   Gene M. Tucker, "Rain on a Land where No One Lives: The Hebrew Bible on the Environment," *JBL* 116/1 (1997): 6.
[19]   It is of course possible to choose other more positive biblical metaphors like water or trees to support eco-theology, but even in these cases trees and water are often portrayed positively in the OT within a cultivated garden, rather than in a natural environment, e.g. Gen 2-3.

Precisely how to define the concept of wilderness has been a contentious issue amongst contemporary scholars. The challenge was to define it in such a way that the definition would not imply that humans do not belong to the natural world and thus widen the chasm between civilization and the wilderness. Scotney has therefore argued that the "received idea of wilderness" – defined as freedom of habitat loss and freedom from disturbance by modern industrial society – is unsatisfactory because it suggests a rift between humans and nature. He therefore suggested an alternative definition, defining wilderness as "an environment free from human activity *as its dominant shaping factor*"[20] (emphasis mine). According to him, this alternative definition does not stand in opposition to civilization.

In our scientific cosmology, nature and the wilderness have become indifferent and impersonal. Nature and wilderness do not care about the wellbeing of humans, but neither are they deliberately hostile towards humans: it may be harsh for humans to survive in the wilderness, but the wilderness is not there to specifically "get you."

It is interesting to note that before the Romantic movement in the 1800s, the wilderness was viewed in a negative light by the western world. It was only during the course of the1800s that a positive appreciation of nature and the wilderness became evident. Now it was no longer necessary to "tame" the wilderness to make it habitable, but it became something to cherish, preserve and enjoy.[21] The late 1800s was the time when the first national parks were declared in the USA. In South Africa, several nature reserves were also declared in Zululand in the 1890s (i.e. Pongola, 1894; Hluhluwe, 1895 and St Lucia 1895). Likewise, the Sabi Game Reserve (later to be expanded into the present Kruger National Park) came into existence in 1898.

The switch in perception, from regarding the wilderness as a hostile and dangerous environment, to a positive view is therefore a relatively recent development in modern society and a relatively late consequence of the switch from a magico-mythical cosmology to a scientific one. The question that could be asked is to what extent the OT agreed with either our current positive perception of the wilderness, or with the basically negative perception of the pre-nineteenth century.

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[20]   Robert Scotney, "Wilderness Recognized: Environments Free from Human Control," in *Old World and New World Perspectives in Environmental Philosophy: Transatlantic Conversations*, ed. Martin Drenthen and Jozef Keulartz (Cham: Springer, 2014), 77.
[21]   George H. Stanskey, "Beyond the Campfire's Light: Historical Roots of the Wilderness Concept," *NRJ* 29 (1989): 8.

2   The Old Testament concept of the wilderness

The HB has no equivalent to our modern concept of nature,[22] but it does have the narrower concept of wilderness (*midbar)* – referring to wild places in general, but more specifically to the desert, surrounding the habitable areas of Palestine.[23] This view of the wilderness largely concurs with our modern concept of the wilderness as a remote, lonely and largely unknown place.[24]

However, within the magico-mythical cosmology of ancient Israel the wilderness was at best viewed with ambivalence and at worst as a dangerous and hostile place. It was regarded as a liminal or in-between-space outside the known living space of the community.[25] In the magico-mythical cosmology of the ANE, the horizon (especially the eastern and western horizons) was perceived as the place where heaven, earth and the underworld came together. Located on these horizons were portals to both the heaven and the underworld, with a garden of the gods located on the eastern horizon.[26] Liminal or in-between spaces were often located between the horizon and the living space of humans. As such, the wilderness (or forests in European fairy tales) was perceived as in-between spaces. The proximity of liminal space to the portals of heaven and underworld therefore explains why this was the place where one could expect to meet the gods or other supernatural or magical creatures. For example, in Gen 32:24-30, Jacob finds himself in the wilderness east of the Jordan River, about to cross the Jabbok River. He was, however, prevented from crossing the river and had to struggle the whole night with a supernatural creature before he could cross the river.[27]

Like all liminal spaces, the wilderness was regarded as a dangerous and unknown place – to be avoided by ordinary humans except by the most desperate outcast, or by the bravest person. It was therefore regarded as a punishment when the Israelites were prohibited from entering the land of Canaan and had to wander around in the liminal space of the wilderness of Sinai for 40 years (Num 32:13).

However, contrary to the generally negative concept of the wilderness, it was also a place where one could meet God. The Sinai wilderness was the place where God guided the Israelites day and night, and where Moses could meet God and receive the Ten Commandments (Exod 19). Mount Horeb and the wilderness

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[22]   Tucker, "Rain on a Land," 6.

[23]   See "דבר" *BDB, 505*.

[24]   However, most South Africans would perhaps in the first place think about the African bush and not specifically about a desert.

[25]   Heda Jason, *Ethnopoetry: Form, Content, Function* (Bonn: Linguistica Biblica, 1977), 198-99.

[26]   Christopher Woods, "At the Edge of the World: Cosmological Conceptions of the Eastern Horizon in Mesopotamia," *JANER* 9/2 (2009): 198-204.

[27]   Allen P. Ross, "Jacob at the Jabbok, Israel at Peniel," *BSac* 137 (1980): 340.

around it was also the place where Moses saw the burning bush and spoke with God (Exod 3:1) and where the prophet Elijah received instruction from God (1 Kgs 19). However, the possibility of getting "close to God" in the wilderness did not nullify the fact that it was generally regarded as a dangerous place (like all liminal and sacred places) that should be avoided, at least by ordinary individuals.[28]

Although this largely negative concept of the wilderness may look strange from our modern (post-19th century) positive perception of the wilderness, we can nonetheless still appreciate people's fear of its harsh conditions, the dangerous animals in it, and ultimately the fear of the unknown. In this regard, the ancient Israelites' perception of the wilderness was very similar to that of our forefathers, who viewed it as a dangerous and unknown place that first had to be "tamed" to make it habitable. To use the OT concept of the wilderness as a positive metaphor in eco-theology therefore poses a number of critical hermeneutical questions.

D   GETTING OUT OF THE HERMENEUTICAL WILDERNESS

How can eco-theologians get out of this "hermeneutical wilderness"? Should they simply accept that the Bible can make no positive contribution to modern issues such as ecology, gender equality and the pursuit of establishing democratic societies? To be quite honest, none of these concerns, so important to us today, were issues in biblical times or received any real attention in the Bible. To make matters worse, in many cases the Bible was not only indifferent to these concerns, but expressed contrary views to what we would have liked. As mentioned earlier, the wilderness was seen in the OT as an undesirable and hostile place; in the patriarchal society of biblical times, women were regarded as little more than prized possessions, and democracy was not even considered as a remote possibility within the God-ordained kingship system of the ANE.

To escape this dilemma, theologians had in the past tended to follow one of two routes:

(i)   They focused on a few incidental remarks in the Bible that may be interpreted in a positive light with regard to the issue they wanted to explore. Following such a positive analysis, they then proposed that one only had to read the Bible with "different glasses" to discover its previously "hidden" message with regard to contemporary issues. For example, in eco-theology, incidental remarks in the Bible about God letting it rain on uninhabited land (thus caring for nature for its own sake – Job 38:26)[29] and the comment that one should not completely raid the nests of wild birds by taking both the mother and the eggs/chicks (Deut 22:6-7), were

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[28]   Mircea Eliade, *Das Heilige und das Profane* (Hamburg: Rohwohlt, 1957), 7-9.
[29]   Tucker, "Rain on a Land."

suddenly pushed into the limelight and assigned an importance that would have confused the ancient reader. This kind of cherry-picking is ultimately based on the fundamentalist position of concordism (i.e. the belief that the Bible must agree—or be in accord with all the major findings of contemporary science and, if read closely, would thus also address contemporary issues like ecology).[30] In terms of eco-theology, this would imply that the Bible somehow miraculously anticipated present-day ecological issues and that these issues can be unearthed by today's interpreters, if only they approached the Bible from the "right angle."

(ii)   The second possibility to solve the dilemma of biblical hermeneutics is to read the Bible "against its grain."[31] This view suggests that, contrary to concordism, one accepts the fact that the biblical message is "a child of its time" and therefore expressed a view of the wilderness that is congruent with the magico-mythical worldview of the ANE. Acknowledging this fact is, however, only the first step in the process of interpretation. The more critical question is how an indifferent or negative message about the wilderness can be transformed into a relevant and positive meaning for our time.

1   Identifying core elements within the Bible

I believe that Option 1 – the fundamentalist choice of concordism – is either naïve or deceitful and cannot be maintained in the long run. Critical exegetes are therefore only left with Option 2 and thus have to negotiate the sometimes treacherous path of reading against the grain of the biblical text when dealing with contemporary issues such as ecology, feminism and democracy. Fortunately, such a process of reinterpretation is not breaking entirely new ground, because one can take a leaf out of the page of the anti-slavery campaigns of the 1800s: when challenged with the injustices of slavery, anti-slavery campaigners were confronted with the untasteful reality that it was not condemned anywhere in the Bible and that slaves were explicitly required to submit to and obey their masters (e.g. Lev 25:44-46; Exod 21:2-21; Eph 6:5). However, when applying the general ethical biblical principles of the Bible (see later) one could argue that slavery is not compatible with these ethical principles, even though this fact was not recognized by the early biblical authors and audiences.

Such a process of reinterpretation would imply that, even when it is acknowledged by critical scholars that the Bible is a collection of diverse writings, some core or unity need to be distilled from the Bible so that this core can be used as a measure against which "undesirable" elements in the canon can be

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[30]   Walton, *Lost World*, 19.
[31]   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. Meye (Dallas: Word, 1992), 82-83.

judged and reinterpreted.[32] This procedure implies a version of the Lutheran hermeneutical principle: "*was Christum treibet*." However, such a procedure raises a myriad of other questions and problems. For example: 1) is it thereby suggested that the Bible is not perfect in all regards (although fundamentalism would protest against such a notion) and if this is the case, how should the authority of the Bible then be re-defined? 2) How does one extract general ethical principles from the Bible without resorting to overly subjective cherry-picking? This is a serious problem, as was illustrated by the way in which South African theologians from the Dutch Reformed Church misused the Bible in the 1970s in an attempt to justify the system of apartheid.[33]

Another example of how difficult it can be to have general agreement on a core for the Bible was exposed when OT theologians tried to define a so-called "center of the OT" during the latter half of the 1900s. What became clear from these attempts was that it was not possible to successfully reduce the OT to a single, or even a dual center, as Georg Fohrer suggested.[34]

Although it is not possible to completely avoid the problems of reductionism and subjectivism, biblical scholars (like all scientists) should at least try to minimize these problems when searching for overarching principles contained within the Bible. In practice, the ideal of avoiding excessive reductionism implies that when identifying a core element within the biblical canon, it should be recognized that it is only one of potentially many core elements. This endeavor of distilling core elements from the Bible therefore differs from the quest to find a center for the OT (or for the Bible) in that such a core element could never function as an all-encompassing concept by which every single biblical book or diverse theology can be encapsulated. Given the diversity of biblical books and theologies, it is highly probable that such a core concept will even be contradicted by some strands within the Bible.[35] In such cases, a core concept can be used to censure "undesirable" strands within the biblical text, or to "read against the grain" of a text.

Excessive subjectivism in choosing core elements (or ethical principles) within the Christian Bible can be minimized by firstly asking oneself to what extent the chosen core element coincides with a personal pet-project or interest, or if it is generally supported by other theologians. Secondly, the proposed core

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[32]   J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 4.

[33]   Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika, *Ras, volk en nasie en volkever-houdinge in die lig van die Skrif* (Kaapstad: NG-Kerk Uitgewers, 1975).

[34]   Georg Fohrer, *Theologische Grundstrukturen des Alten Testaments*, ThBT 24 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972), 274; Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 4th upd. enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 139-71.

[35]   Wogaman, *Christian Ethics*, 4.

principle should play a significant role in the Bible and not be restricted or unique to one or two strands within the Bible. Both these judgements are by no means easy, but that does not mean they are impossible to make.[36]

Before any element within the Bible could be proposed as a core element, one should further be able to demonstrate that it is not an incidental remark, but can be viewed as an overarching principle within a larger hierarchy of principles which encompass a number of other laws and demands, or can be viewed as the foundation for such laws. In the following section I argue that "love your neighbor as yourself" can be identified as one such core element and in Section 4 I demonstrate how this core element can be applied to nature conservation.

2   Love your neighbor as yourself

Without any fear of contradiction one could say that the one core ethical principle within the Bible is the directive to "love your neighbor as yourself." The generality with which this dictum is emphasized within both theological writings and sermons is undeniable. It therefore meets the criterion of being generally accepted within Christian (and Jewish) communities and amongst theologians as a core element within the Bible, and therefore cannot be dismissed as a mere pet concern of a few individuals.

In the OT, Lev 19:9-18 explicitly demands from the Israelites to love their neighbors as themselves and extend this loving care even to non-Israelites or strangers (*ger*) (also see Deut 10:18). What makes this demand even more significant is the fact that the directive to love people outside their own clan or nation in the OT was probably an unparalleled requirement in the Ancient world.[37]

This requirement to love others is further taken up in the NT. In the Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5-7), love and harmony amongst people are the main focal points and the command not to kill is even extended to not being unnecessarily angry with other people (Mat 5:22). In Matt 5:43-44, Jesus explicitly demands that his disciples should also love their enemies. This emphasis on loving one's neighbors is not only present in the book of Matthew, but is also emphasized by Mark 12:30-31 and John 13:34-35), whilst 1 Cor 13:31 regards love as even more important than faith or hope.

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[36]   The everything-or-nothing principle of binary Aristotelian logic should be avoided by theologians. The mere fact that a judgement call may not be perfect does not mean that it is completely invalid. One should rather assess *to what extent* any such call may be true or false, see Bart Kosko, *Fuzzy Thinking: The New Science of Fuzzy Logic* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993).

[37]   Albert H. Post, *Grundriss Der Ethnologischen Jurisprudenz* (Leipzig: Oldenburg, 1894), 448.

In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus links the concept of "love your neighbor" specifically to the Law of Moses and identifies the love of God and one's neighbor as intrinsically linked, and as the core demand to all believers. Loving one's neighbor as oneself can therefore be regarded as an overarching concept, which is the rational for all the biblical laws dealing with human relationships, including respect for life, the demand for justice and the regulations with regard to marriage and family relationships. All these ethical demands can ultimately be arranged within a hierarchy with the overarching principle being the right of all people to be treated as one wishes to be treated oneself; that is, with love, care and consideration. The demand to love one's neighbor as oneself therefore fulfils all the requirements to be identified as a core principle within the Bible, including the fact that it forms the foundation of many other ethical principles.

3   Diverse and contradictory elements in the Bible

To identify an overarching core principle in the Bible may be possible (as was suggested above), but to the extent to which such a principle can be applied to various contexts may be more problematic, given the diversity of biblical writings and views. One of the key fallacies amongst lay people and fundamentalist theologians is the belief that everything in the Bible can be harmonized and that the Bible teaches exactly the same things from Genesis to Revelations. Such a view could, however, be regarded as nothing less than intellectual dishonesty or as " … riding roughshod over the evidences of difference and inconsistency."[38]

One way to explain the inconsistencies within the Bible is to accept the concept of gradual revelation and, more specifically, the idea that the implications of specific ethical or moral demands were only gradually realized by believers as circumstances changed. For example, living within the patriarchal society of the ANE, it never occurred to the Israelites that loving one's neighbor also implied that women should be treated as equal to men, although this may seem logical to our present emancipated society. One can argue that such new insights or application of the demand to love one's neighbor as oneself are predicated on continued revelation, but it cannot be denied that it also appeals to reason: "The biblical legacy … would seem to suggest that serious thought about ethics must employ both revelation and reason …."[39] One can therefore conclude that a principle like "love one's neighbor as oneself" may be regarded as absolutely true, whilst its practical application would always be relative to the *Zeitgeist* and the society of its time. This suggests that its application within certain texts in the Bible may not be absolutely true, but was determined by its cosmology (e.g. by its specific political or societal outlook and was relative to that).

The main task for the biblical exegete would therefore always be to ask how the ethical principle of love applies to new situations and insights, and to

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[38]   Wogaman, *Christian Ethics*, 4.
[39]   Wogaman, *Christian Ethics*, 7.

what extent biblical texts may depend on their relative situation and might later become unacceptable with newer insights and changed situations. For example, the instances in the OT where war and violence against an enemy are promoted, to the extent that the biblical author of Ps 137 wished that the infants from Babylon should be smashed against the rocks (Ps 137:9), should be exposed as a revolting expression of hatred, depended upon the political undertones of that specific psalm and not compatible with love one's neighbor or applicable to today's society.

4   How does "Love your neighbor" apply to the wilderness?

This brings us to the negative concept of wilderness in the OT. Can the ethical principle of "love one's neighbor" also be applied to this issue? A related question would be if the wilderness and its plant and animal inhabitants could be personalized to the extent that they can be regarded as our neighbors. It seems that in a quest to avoid an anthropocentric view, the Earth Bible Project and their proposal of eco-justice principles would support such a notion.[40] Although this is a laudable attempt by these authors, I think it may be stretching the concept of justice and love one's neighbor a little far. To personalize the Earth and give it a voice like a human may be an effective way of "selling" the concept to a wider audience, but may not be convincing to "mainline" theologians.

For this reason, I think it is necessary to explore the reasons why eco-theologians are so critical of an anthropocentric viewpoint again. Their criticism was largely motivated by the idea that the value of non-human living forms such as plants or animals would be devaluated if everything was viewed from a human point of view only. Although this danger of devaluation is real, one should however ask if anything but a human viewpoint is possible. It is easy for armchair theologians to theoretically propose that animals and plants have just as many rights as humans and are equally important, but is this any more than wishful thinking?

I would like to take the practical and common example of a group of tourists hiking with a game ranger in an African wilderness area. If the group is charged by an elephant and it is not possible to divert the elephant or run away from it, what should the game ranger do if it comes down to a choice between the life of one of the hikers or the life of the elephant? Should the game ranger shoot the elephant, or allow it to kill one of the humans? Of course, the game

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[40] Norman C. Habel, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press / Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), online: http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=742786; Norman C. Habel, ed., *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, EBCS 4 (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press / Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Norman C. Habel and Vicky Balabanski, eds., *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, EBCS 5 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

ranger should only shoot the elephant as an absolute last resort and try to avoid such a confrontation in the first place, but can we really argue that the elephant and humans have the same right to live in a situation like this?[41]

The unpalatable fact of life is that no animals or humans can remain alive without killing other living beings; that is, either pathogens, plants or other animals. At the most one could use fuzzy logic by saying that it becomes increasingly unacceptable to kill living things as one moves from plants to higher animals, to sentient beings, to humans. But killing humans would always be judged by us as more wrong than killing plants or animals. The idea of giving equal rights to nature, animals and humans is therefore nothing more than an unrealistic pipe dream. Should we not rather accept our anthropocentric view and use that as the basis for our argument? Although this may sound like vulgar utilitarianism to idealists, or may be criticized as judging the worth of everything only in terms of its usefulness to humans, such a view may be more effective and convincing than sentimental proposals about the intrinsic value of the wilderness.

According to my thinking, eco-theologians can argue convincingly that "love one's neighbor as oneself" should also apply to the neighbor's utilization and enjoyment of nature and that "one's neighbor" includes future generations. It is a well-recognized ecological concept that all life on earth is linked with nature (and the wilderness) within one interdependent system. Without plants, humans and animals would have no food or oxygen. Without animals, the existence of many plants would become impossible, because many of them depend on animal pollination, dispersal of seeds and the carbon dioxide produced by such animals.

If this concept of the interlinkage of all life, including human life is acknowledged, it logically follows that without nature functioning properly (including wilderness areas) human life would not be possible. The potential effects of climate change and running out of fresh water on our future survival are only two examples of the kind of calamity we can expect when forests are destroyed, water is wasted or contaminated, and wilderness areas are severely limited. A myriad of other reasons can be forwarded why humans cannot survive without maintaining natural wilderness areas, but these would fall outside the scope of this article. People living only for themselves and who do not care for the wilderness are therefore ultimately responsible for killing their future "neighbors."[42]

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[41] This is of course an extreme example, and does not in any way wish to imply that human rights should always triumph over animal and nature rights. In many cases, human comforts and financial gain should be sacrificed in order to protect nature.

[42] In a sense one can argue that because all living beings are inter-connected, they should all be regarded as our neighbors and should therefore be included in the ethical imperative to love one's neighbor. Although such a notion would greatly strengthen

A less materialistic and more spiritual/psychological argument can also be proposed. Although it may be true that not all people enjoy the wilderness equally, it is nonetheless true that many people find nature very enjoyable and inspirational on many levels. As humans become more urbanized, the wilderness increasingly fulfils the psychological need to escape the mundane aspects of our present-day urban life and provides an opportunity for adventure. The wilderness also serves an important aesthetic function to many people: "unspoilt" nature is valued for its beauty and serves as an inspiration to many artists and photographers, among others. The psychological need of humans to include beauty into their life can hardly be over-emphasized.

The potential aesthetic and enjoyment functions of the wilderness should therefore not be neglected by eco-theologians. By destroying nature or utilizing it in a non-sustainable manor we are effectively denying our future neighbors this form of enjoyment and beauty, which would be a violation of the demand for love and care for your neighbor.[43]

E   CONCLUSION

Any attempt to interpret the biblical concept of the wilderness in a more positive light would be futile. It is also not convincing to build an entire eco-theology on a few isolated positive remarks about the wilderness. However, this does not mean that theologians have nothing to say about nature conservation. By stripping the biblical wilderness metaphor of its magico-mythical assumptions and by applying general ethical principles to it, we can construct new meaning. Rather than only looking for biblical metaphors that may resonate with issues of our contemporary society, we should transform biblical perceptions about the wilderness (as we needed to do with perceptions about women and slavery) and then construct new meaning that is informed by general biblical ethics such as "loving one's neighbor as oneself."

Often this will involve reading against the grain of biblical texts dealing with the wilderness, but this should only challenge us to go beyond the text and measure it against the core ethical principles of the Bible. Stripped from its magico-mythical undertones, the wilderness metaphor can be transformed into something positive: as a place that is no longer regarded as an undesirable place,

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eco-ecology's argument to protect nature, it does not solve the problematic issue in extreme cases when a choice need to be made between human and animal/nature rights.

[43]   Although some theologians would also argue along the lines of natural theology; that is, that nature is essentially moral and could therefore be used as an example to humans, I think such views largely choose to ignore the less attractive aspects of nature like unnecessary cruelty. It is therefore better to rather regard nature as non-moral than to selectively try to extract ethical principles from it. See Stephan J. Gould, "Nonmoral Nature," in *Great Essays in Science*, ed. Martin Gardner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 34-45.

inhabited by dangerous supernatural creatures, but as a place that could be cherished for its beauty and remoteness. It is a place where believers can indeed get close to their God, not because it is supposed to be geographically closer to heaven, but because it can be a place of contemplation and isolation from everyday life.

Without caring for the wilderness, we therefore not only jeopardize the life of future generations, but also deny them the possibility of enjoying the psychological and aesthetical benefits of the wilderness.

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