

Who Will Speak for the Sparrow?
Eco-Justice Criticism of the New Testament
by David Rhoads

Giving Voice to Nature in Biblical Interpretation.

In recent decades, there has been a revolution in biblical studies due in part to the many new voices that have entered the academic arena of interpretation—Jewish scholars, European-American women, women of color, diverse cultural groups within the USA, and voices of men and women from virtually every continent, nation, and culture in the world.¹ These new voices are speaking out of their respective “social locations,” offering not only new perspectives on biblical texts but also fresh insights about the appropriation of biblical texts for a diversity of modern contexts. They have initiated a dialogue with the biblical materials that invites transformation and at the same time calls for critique of and resistance to the Bible. These voices often speak from circumstances of oppression and exploitation in colonial or postcolonial situations, and they expose the ways in which the Bible has been used in the service of oppression.

Yet even with these many voices, there is a perspective that is seldom spoken for, namely, the natural world. As much as any group of humans, nature requires a voice in biblical interpretation. Given the exploitation, domination, and degradation of creation at human hands, we desperately need to expose the role of the Bible in the human (mis)treatment of nature and to explore the role that the Bible might take in fostering a renewing and sustaining approach to nature. Of course, we cannot separate human beings from the rest of nature. We are inextricably formed by, dependent upon, and bound up with all of nature. What we humans do affects the rest of nature, and what happens to the rest of nature affects the well-being of humans. Therefore, concern for nature should inform our reading of the Bible. In a sense, because we are so integrally related to the rest of nature, those who interpret the Bible with nature in mind will be giving voice to creation, both human and non-human. So who will speak for creation? If it is true that “not one sparrow is forgotten in God’s sight” (Luke 12: 6), who will speak for the sparrow?

Eco-Justice Criticism of the New Testament.

I believe we are entering an environmental age in which the devastating changes to the environment and our consequent preoccupation with the environment will alter every aspect of our personal and communal lives. So as Christians we need to explore the Bible for what it says about creation and the role of human beings as part of that creation. Of course, we will not find in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament our modern concerns over the human degradation of creation—the deterioration of the ozone layer, threats to life from global warming, the effects of massive garbage and toxic waste disposal, the problems of deforestation and desertification, or the loss of biological diversity. Nevertheless, there is much in the New Testament that has implications for the environmental crisis and that under girds a commitment to care for God’s

¹ See, for example, Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, ed. Reading From This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) and Reading From This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

creation. Some seminal books and articles in eco-justice interpretation have appeared in Old Testament studies, but only a few such articles have appeared in New Testament studies.²

This essay seeks to offer some systematic reflection on reading the New Testament in an environmental age by proposing what we might call Eco-Justice Criticism. Such a methodological approach would be similar to Feminist Criticism. Just as Feminist Criticism recovered the presence of women in the text and in the early church as a means to change our picture of early Christianity, so Eco-justice Criticism would seek to recover New Testament images and attitudes toward nature as a means to change our understanding of biblical texts. Eco-Justice Criticism would use traditional historical-critical methods, along with literary and social-science methods, as ways to construct the possible meanings of biblical writings in their first century contexts. At the same time, Eco-Justice criticism would offer ways to appropriate biblical texts for our time in light of modern concerns for ecology and justice.

I lift up various elements as potentially important dimensions of Eco-Justice Criticism.

- (1) A Hermeneutic of Suspicion
- (2) A Hermeneutic of Recovery
- (3) Constructing New Testament understandings of nature and cosmology
- (4) Interpreting each biblical writing with nature and cosmology in the picture
- (5) New Testament models of diagnosis and transformation
- (6) Reframing biblical concepts in eco-justice terms
- (7) The New Testament as a manual for facing a possible end to the world

What follows then is a brief explication and illustration of each of these areas as a way to project possible methods and procedures for an Eco-Justice Criticism.

(1) A Hermeneutic of Suspicion.

We need to embrace a hermeneutic of suspicion that ferrets out the negative and destructive dynamics of the human relationship to creation as portrayed in the New Testament. Some of the problems in reading the New Testament from an eco-justice perspective clearly lie with the New Testament itself. Egregious examples of disparaging attitudes toward nature in the New Testament include the drowning of a herd of two-thousand pigs in the Sea of Galilee (Mark 5:1-20), the cursing of a fig tree (Mark 11:12-14, 20-25), an aside by Paul that God has no interest in oxen for their own sake (1 Corinthians 9:9-10), and the destruction of nature by God as punishment for idolatry in the Book of Revelation. More difficult than these passages are some of the assumptions and worldviews of the New Testament writings, such as anthropocentrism, dualism, other-worldly apocalyptic expectations, an absence of connection to the “land” of Israel, and the tendency to see this world simply as a pilgrimage to heaven.

Other problems lie with our interpretations of the New Testament rather than with the writings themselves. When we look at the secondary literature on the Bible, we can see that we have not tended to integrate nature and cosmology into the overall interpretations of biblical

² The most ambitious project for reading the Bible with ecology in mind is the Earth Bible, a series of volumes edited by Norman Habel and comprised of articles on different parts of the Bible that deal with issues bearing ecological implications. For further information, see <www.webofcreation.org/earthbible/earthbible.html>. Note there also the aims and eco-justice principles of The Earth Bible Project. This site also contains an extensive bibliography of books and articles on the Bible that are of ecological interest.

texts. In fact, cosmology and nature may be the most neglected factors in New Testament interpretation today. North America European-American Christians have tended to read the New Testament on the basis of our detachment from nature. We have failed to see the assumptions of the early Christians that all life is communal and that all human communities are embedded in the natural world. Thus, in the New Testament, there is no salvation apart from community, and there is no community apart from the whole (re-)creation. We need to rectify our neglect and begin to restore nature and the cosmology of creation to our interpretations of the New Testament views of the world.

One way to rectify our blindness is for interpreters of the Bible to be conscious of reading not only from our “social location” but also from our “natural location.” That is, we can interpret and appropriate the biblical materials in light of our human relationship to the natural world—personal, regional, and global. If we keep before us the dynamic, interactive relationship between humans and the rest of nature, we will surely begin to see aspects of the biblical materials we have long neglected. And in so doing, we will be able to integrate our commitment to care for creation into our whole interpretive process.

(2) A Hermeneutic of Recovery.

Despite some nature “texts of terror,” there is much in the New Testament that is also promising from an eco-justice perspective and we need to recover it from its embeddedness in the texts. In this regard, there has been somewhat of a revolution in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in recent years. Biblical theology of the Hebrew Bible used to emphasize salvation history as human history only, predicated on the idea that Hebrews focused on a human, historical covenant with God in contrast to a relationship with nature that was typical of the nature religions of the time. Now, however, scholars have realized that nature was always an integral part of the Hebrew view of the world and that we need to speak of salvation history as the history of the whole created order.

When we come to reading the New Testament, we see that the amount of material on creation is much smaller, even proportionally, than what we find in the Hebrew Bible. Views of nature and cosmology are embedded in texts almost as incidental matters. So we have to do somewhat of a rescue operation. What follows are examples of four areas of contrast between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and some suggestions about what we can recover from the New Testament for our study of nature and cosmology.

First, unlike the Hebrew Bible, there are no stories that explicitly describe the act of creation and the place of humans in creation. Nevertheless, there is more material in the New Testament than we might expect. For example, we can infer a great deal about creatures and creation from the New Testament, because the writers tend to assume Hebrew Bible views about creation. Further, several New Testament writings, such as the Gospel of John and the Letter to the Hebrews, assign a role for Christ in creation. In addition, the New Testament tells many re-creation stories—stories about the restoration of creation (for example, the Letter to the Colossians) and stories of people who recover their proper place in creation (such as we find in the Gospel of Mark). These stories affirm that God does not abandon creation but rather redeems and fulfills it. Finally, while there are no “creation” stories in the New Testament, there are indeed “consummation” stories about the fulfillment of creation such as the vision of the new Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation (21:1-22:5)—apocalyptic stories that have many implications for our view of humans in relation to nature.

Secondly, unlike the Hebrew Bible, there are no extended passages in the New Testament that describe the larger natural world, treating it with awe and with delight for its own sake, descriptions such as we find in some Psalms and in certain passages in the prophets and in the book of Job. Nevertheless, there are views of nature embedded in or implied throughout the New Testament writings in a line here or a brief passage there. For example, Jesus used many parables and sayings about nature in his teaching. Also, there are numerous incidental descriptions of nature, such as the reference to the heavens being ripped open in the description of Jesus' baptism). And we find several acclamations of God as creator, such as the portrayal of God as "the Lord of the heaven and the earth" (Acts of the Apostles 17:22-28). When we treat these brief passages as windows through which to discern the larger affirmations and assumptions about nature behind them, then the whole writing in which they are embedded may look quite different.

Thirdly, the Hebrew Bible offers explicitly integrated histories of humans in relation to the rest of nature. As we have just indicated, recent scholarship has made it clear that salvation in the Hebrew Bible sees both human history and natural history as one unified story.³ Salvation histories in the Hebrew Bible are creation histories. By contrast, salvation in the New Testament is predominantly anthropocentric, focusing almost exclusively on the salvation of humans; that is, it is centered on human beings rather than on the redemption of nature or of creation as a whole. In the New Testament there is no covenant that includes animals, no promises connected with the land, and the metaphors for salvation are overwhelmingly human—as if redemption existed for humans alone and not for all of creation. Nevertheless, the New Testament writers often imply and suggest a great deal about cosmology and nature as an integral part of human salvation. For example, despite the neglect of nature in the New Testament, events of human salvation and judgment are never really completely divorced from the rest of the natural world. For instance, a star appears at Jesus' birth (Matthew 2:2), the arrival of the kingdom involves the calming of storms at sea (e. g. Mark 4:35-41), the oppression of humans will be accompanied by signs in the sun and stars (Luke 21:25-26), Jesus will return on the clouds (Luke 21:27-28), and at the endtime the trees will produce fruit all year round (Revelation 22:2). Thus, in the New Testament, as in the Hebrew Bible, the human world, the natural world, and the spirit world comprise one world with one integrated history.

Finally, the Hebrew Bible does not seem to have major ontological dualisms. By contrast, dualisms pervade most of the New Testament writings, such as God's Spirit and the life of the flesh, heaven and earth, this age and the age to come, and so on. Such dualisms tend to denigrate this world as an age passing away or simply as a place of pilgrimage on the way to heaven. However, even the dualistic aspects of New Testament thought are not totally negative toward creation. In the New Testament, Spirit fulfills the matter; it does not do away with it. The New Testament condemns an orientation to the flesh, not flesh or body as such. After all, as John testifies, the Word became flesh. Also, the coming apocalyptic age focuses not on heaven, but on a transformed earth (or a new heaven and a new earth), for the expectation was that Jesus was coming back to the earth—a view that supports the vision of the new creation as an affirmation of the world rather than as a rejection or abandonment of it.

(3) Constructing New Testament understandings of nature and cosmology.

³See especially Theodore Hiebert, The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

We will benefit from efforts to describe the first century views of nature and the cosmos, ferreting out some of the distinctive religious attitudes and pre-scientific understandings of the world. What may be significant here is the way in which the construction of the cosmos informs social attitudes and behavior.

For the most part, the New Testament writers shared the Hebrew view of the world. The earth was flat with land and sea bounded by the four corners of the earth from whence came the four earthly winds. The earth was covered by a canopy on which the sun, moon, and stars were affixed and moved as the whole canopy circulated. There was an underworld of some murky reality. And there was water over the canopy (hence rain) and water under the earth (hence springs and wells).

One factor that stands out in the Hebrew conception of the world is that the cosmos was bounded on all sides. It was a closed system. As large and awesome as the world seemed to ancient peoples, it had limits on every side. There was no such notion as infinite or expanding space. The cosmos was finite. The image of the cosmos as a closed system reinforced the experience people had that all of life was limited. There was only so much land on which to live, only so much fruit could grow on any given plant, and a woman could have only so many children. Such a view of the world as finite extended to the life experiences of people: the land around a village could only support so many people to live in that village; there was only so much wealth to go around; there was only so much power; and there was only so much honor. This typical perception of peasant cultures that “all goods were limited and in short supply” affected the economic, social, and political system: people were discouraged from accumulating wealth because it meant others were deprived; there was always a struggle to maintain one’s honor and not to seek honor beyond one’s place; and only so many people could wield power.⁴

A moment’s consideration will enable us to realize that our modern Western attitudes and behaviors are likewise reflected in our view of the cosmos. In our view, the universe is infinite. There are no perceived boundaries or limits to things. This view of the cosmos parallels our economic, social, political attitudes. Our economic system is predicated on unlimited resources. The unlimited accumulation of wealth is not treated as greed or considered to diminish any one else’s capacity to become wealthy. In the words of a brokerage firm, “Your world should know no boundaries.” Conventional wisdom says that “profit profits everyone.” Socially, we believe we can do anything if we set our minds to it. Politically, there is enough power for everyone, and anyone can be president. These attitudes and behaviors form a coherent mentality that are informed by our view of the universe as unlimited.

However, we are learning from ecology that earth is, in fact, finite. We are a closed system (spaceship earth). The earth is bounded by an ozone layer. There are limited natural resources in the earth. The land can only support so large a population. There is only so much space to dump waste. Carbon dioxide released by human activities does not disappear into some endless space but warms the globe. There is a limit to the diversity of plants and animals we can drive to extinction before we threaten regional eco-systems and global life in general. Perhaps we could learn from the biblical materials how the authors addressed the human problems that come from living in such a closed system—such as greed, envy, arrogance, and conflicts over limited

⁴ See Bruce Malina, New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology Third revised edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). For an application of this insight to the Letter of James, see my “The Letter of James: Friend of God,” Currents in Theology and Mission 25 (1998) 473-486.

goods. And we could learn from them how they understood that God acted in and through Jesus to enable people to overcome these human problems.

(4) Interpreting each biblical writing with nature and cosmology in the picture.

One approach to reading the New Testament through “green lenses” is to take each writing as a whole and interpret it with a sensitivity to its views of all creation. Here, briefly, are four such probes.

A. The Gospel of Mark.

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12-13)

Traditional treatments of the kingdom of God view it as an establishment of God’s rulership over people and society. However, it is clear from a closer look at the Gospels, Mark in particular, that the kingdom of God involves a restoration of all creation, nature included.

Mark’s view of the rule of God focuses on power from God to liberate people from all forms of oppression, including oppression from nature. For Mark, the arrival of the kingdom of God restores people to their proper place in creation. With access to power from God, agents of the kingdom—Jesus and the disciples—have authority over demons, illness, and natural phenomena but not over other people. Through faith (which, for Mark, provides access to God’s power), humans can stop destructive winds, calm seas, provide bread in the desert, and, if appropriate, move mountains (11:23). Like people, nature is to serve rather than to destroy. Hence, the Gospel of Mark portrays the arrival of the kingdom of God as a restoration of human society in the context of all creation.

We get a glimpse into Mark’s view from his depiction of the temptation of Jesus. The words “and he was with the wild beasts” are an aperture into the overall view of nature in Mark’s gospel. Wild beasts are examples of non-domesticated creation, which pose a threat to humans. In Mark’s depiction of the world, the threats posed by nature are signs of a created order gone awry. According to Richard Bauckham, the temptation scene in the desert depicts the ideal restoration.⁵ Jesus is with the wild beasts, but they are no threat to him. In Mark’s view, Jesus has come in part to bring harmony between humans and the rest of the created order—exercising an authority (dominion) in which animals are not a threat to humans. In anticipation of such a realm, Hosea predicted a time when God would abolish war from the land and make a covenant “with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground . . . and make you lie down in safety.” (2:18).

We get another glimpse into Mark’s view of nature with the cursing of the fig tree (11:12-25). Distressing as this image is of a tree “withered to its roots,” the episode reveals a positive relationship between humans and nature. Jesus curses the fig tree because of his hope, as he enters Jerusalem, that the fig tree might be bearing fruit, even though “it is not the season for figs.” The expectation Mark implies here is that when the rule of God comes fully, trees will flourish and bear fruit all year long (even out of season)—as the author of Revelation imagines it

⁵ Richard Bauckham, “Jesus and the Wild Animals (Mark1:13): A Christological Image for an Ecological Age.” *Jesus of Nazareth: Christ and Lord*, Ed. Joel Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994)

in his vision of the new Jerusalem (22:2). Jesus hoped that a fig tree bearing fruit out of season would signal that Israel was ready for the end to come now. When the tree was not bearing fruit out of season, this could only mean that Israel was not ready for the final establishment of the rule of God—and Jesus would therefore have to endure opposition and death in Jerusalem.

When we look at the whole of Mark, a consistent picture emerges: nature is potentially threatening; the arrival of the kingdom of God restores human beings to their proper place and role in creation; by faith, followers participate in the restoration of creation—either coming into harmony with nature or by having authority to overcome its threat. When the rule of God is finally consummated, all life—animals, plants, humans—will flourish together and there will be no threats or deprivations for humans.

B. The Letter to the Romans.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:19-23)

In commenting on this passage, Robert Jewett notes that the creation is here personified as it awaits with eager expectation and groans inwardly in labor pains.⁶ This, Jewett notes, is similar to the modern ecological movement that sees the fate of the creation as intimately tied to the fate of the children of God. In Paul's view, creation fell when the first people in the garden sinned and overstepped their limits in arrogance. Through Christ and the Spirit, God is re-creating people capable of righteousness who will treat one another and all of creation with justice and care. When the new creation arrives and true human beings are revealed and liberated, then all non-human creation will also be set free from its bondage to decay and experience the freedom of the glory of the children of God. This will begin to "restore a rightful balance to creation once again, overcoming the corruption and disorder that resulted from the curse on Adam."⁷ In other words, all creation is eager, because when human beings become righteous they will treat the rest of creation in such a way that all creation will thrive.

Thus, there is a clear connection between the righteousness of human beings and the state of creation. The issue is whether humans will express true dominion or idolatrous dominion. The basic idea, Jewett writes, is that "by acting out idolatrous desires to have unlimited dominion over the garden, the original purpose of creation—to express goodness and to reflect divine glory—was emptied."⁸ The phrase "the glory of the children of God" is thus understood in terms of humans regaining their proper dominion over creation and participating in the righteousness and justice of God whose scope is cosmic.

⁶ Robert Jewett. "Romans 8:18-30" (Unpublished draft of The Hermeneia Commentary on Romans, by permission), p. 15.

⁷ Jewett, p. 17

⁸ Jewett, p. 19. For another treatment of Paul's holistic approach to redemption, see Brendan Byrne, Inheriting the Earth: A Pauline Basis for Spirituality for Our Time (New York: Alba House, 1990).

C. The Letter to the Colossians.

He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created....He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together....For in him all the fullness of the Godhead was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

We are used to thinking of the Christ as a figure who saves humans. The astounding acclamation of this letter is that Christ is redeeming not just human beings but the whole created order. This is the New Testament image of a cosmic Christ. In analyzing this post-Pauline letter, Joseph Sittler was acutely aware of the anthropocentric nature of most metaphors of redemption.⁹ When he thought about the environmental degradation of creation, he was led to conclude that our view of the work of Christ is too small. Now that we are aware how much all of nature needs to be redeemed, he reasoned, we need a Christology that is as large as the size of the problems we face, a Christology that addresses not just human fallenness but the fallenness of all creation—a fallenness caused in large part by human actions.

Sittler pointed to this passage from Colossians as an adequate Christology. Here is an understanding of the cross of Jesus that extends to the whole created order. Jesus did not die for humans alone to be reconciled to God. Instead, Jesus' death is a reconciliation of all things in the whole of creation. The consequence is that humans too are reconciled with "all things" and therefore placed in a new and responsible relationship with the whole created order. The work of Christ as a cosmic redeemer catches the hearer up in a drama of redemption that includes the whole cosmos and is therefore able to address our environmental crisis.¹⁰

D. The Book of Revelation.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were gone. And the sea was no more. (Revelation 21:1)

The Book of Revelation was written to counter the evil and idolatry of the Roman Empire. In the author's view, Rome acclaims itself eternal by virtue of its wealth and power and the extent of its imperial reach (18:7). By its wealth, it has seduced people into an allegiance to Rome that belongs only to God (18:3). By its power, it has coerced tribes, tongues, people, nations, and kings into cooperation (13:4). By its religion, it demands worship from people and cities, and threatens death to those who refuse to submit (13:15). Rome gets drunk on the blood of God's people (17:6). Not only does Rome exploit and dominate and kill people, it also dominates the sea with its shipping (18:11-13, 19), and it rapes the earth with its military conquests.

The author of Revelation counters the idolatrous arrogance and tyranny of Rome over creation with a call to worship the one God who "created the heavens and the earth, the sea and the fresh water springs" (14:7). This is a God whose throne in heaven, whose power, and whose promised wealth in the new Jerusalem are so great that the Roman Empire looks like a pale imitation, a pathetic effort to imitate the true God. This is a God of justice who will give to

⁹ See Joseph Sittler, "Called to Unity," Ecumenical Review 14 (1962) 177-87.

¹⁰ Larry Rasmussen, ethics professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York tells the story of a congregation in Africa. The leader chants: "What did we used to believe?" And the congregation responds, "That Jesus dies for our sins." The leader then continues, "And what do we believe now?" And the congregation announces, "That Jesus died for all creation!"

people as they deserve (2:23). So, when God unleashes wrath against Rome and its idolaters, God does so by doing the very kinds of things that the Romans did when they conquered: people are killed by famine and sword, the land and grass are burned, trees are destroyed, crops are overrun, the rivers and springs are turned to blood or poisoned, rivers dry up, even the sun and moon and stars are compromised so as to plunge people into darkness. Rome is burned to the ground and the kings and merchants and sailors who benefited from her power and wealth watch from afar the smoke from her burning in terror and agony (18:9-19).

Yet there is mercy. This devastation is carried out in incremental stages so as to give people an opportunity to repent of their idolatry and immorality (9:20-21; 16:9, 11). But in the end, because they refuse to repent, justice is meted out by God. As an angel says to God, “You are right in pronouncing this sentence, Lord God omnipotent, because they shed the blood of prophets and saints, so you have given them blood to drink. They have their just reward.” (16:4-6)

This destruction eventually leads to a new heaven and a new earth represented in the vision of the new Jerusalem 21:1-22:5). As Barbara Rossing has shown,¹¹ this vision is compelling because it integrates all creation—humans and the rest of nature—in a harmony of mutual thriving: there is no more sea that Romans dominated to exploit the earth economically; the wealth of the new city is enjoyed by all; the river of life is crystal clear; the water of life is given free of charge, the trees line the river of life and are nourished by it; the tree of life bears fruit for humans every month of the year; the leaves of the trees are a cure for the nations; the glory of God and Jesus will give light to the city; the nations will walk by this light (of justice); the nations who have been freed from Roman domination will willingly bring into the city their treasures and wealth; God will dwell with people; the lamb will shepherd them; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes so that there will be no more grief and crying and pain. The description of the new heaven and new earth is a marvelous depiction of the integration of all creation in which nature is enabled to thrive and bring healing and nourishment to human beings, who in turn live together in justice.

We could illustrate the distinctive views of other New Testament writings as well. As with those portrayed above, the task of Eco-justice Criticism would be to construct a holistic interpretation of each writing so as to include the place of the entire created order in our understanding of that writing.

(4) New Testament models of diagnosis and transformation.

A different way we can look at the New Testament in relation to the environment is less direct. We might seek to understand in what ways the New Testament writings diagnose the human condition and offer redemption through transformation. That is, the various writings of the New Testament address the different ways people are sinful, ways that may today be contributing to our present ecological predicament. Do we exploit the earth because of greed? Because we need to gain honor or justify our existence? Because we have blinded ourselves, by the good things we do, from seeing the harm we do to creation? Because we are afraid to sacrifice our present

¹¹Barbara Rossing, “Rivers of Life in God’s New Jerusalem: An Eschatological Vision of Earth’s Future” in Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans, Ed. Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 205-224.

security with choices made for the good of future generations? Because we are alienated from the creator and from the rest of creation? The New Testament writings address these differing forms of human sinfulness and offer some resources to liberate people for a transformed existence that will foster sustainable lifestyles.¹²

For example, Luke condemns the accumulation of wealth as an abomination to God in a world where people are poor and marginalized. He invites everyone into a new reality of God's rule where wealth and power and honor are shared. His message of social repentance and divine forgiveness evokes compassion for a transformed life lived for others. Luke's condemnation of wealth and vision of justice could call us to a more equitable sharing of the world's goods and a more sustainable lifestyle.

Paul addresses the exploitation of people (and, by implication, nature) that occurs when we humans seek to justify ourselves. When we seek to justify ourselves, we see other people as pawns in our effort to prove our own significance or worth. Paul's announcement of good news that we are already justified by grace liberates us to love others (and nature) for their own sake (rather than love them for our sake) without the need to use them in our project to prove something about ourselves.¹³ Paul's gospel could free us from our personal and national drive to be number one and empower us to make decisions that benefit the larger good, even if it means less for ourselves.

Matthew condemns our blind hypocrisy that prevents us from acknowledging the destructive aspects of our behavior. As the Sermon on the Mount shows, Jesus seeks to confront us with our hypocrisy and to reveal it to us. At the same time, he dies for people's sins and promises to be with them. With these spiritual resources, we have no need to be defensive or to hide our failures and sins. Rather, we now have the capacity to look honestly at ourselves, to repent, and to change our behavior. Matthew can help us to take an unblinking look at what we are doing to the environment as a basis for assessing the ways we need to change.

John's Gospel lifts up our alienation from the creator as the root of the human condition. He proclaims a gospel in which Jesus acts to bring people back into spiritual relationship with God. In the process, the whole created order (bread, water, light, vines and branches, doors, and so on) is sanctified by its capacity metaphorically to bear the reality of the One through whom all things were created. John's Gospel could enliven in us a renewed love of creation as the basis for our relationship to it and our use of it.

As we come to a clearer understanding of the ways we contribute to the ecological crisis and discover our resistances to change, the different gospels in the New Testament can enable us to address our human sinfulness and empower us for transformation. If we seek to overcome our environmental problems out of guilt or fear or anxiety about ourselves or a sense of hopelessness, we will probably only make matters worse. But if we address the environmental crisis out of the good news of God's promise of redemption and liberation, then we will be fed by the hope and the grace and the compassion and the joy of God. Such resources will better prepare us for the choices and changes that may be required of us as we face the crises that environmental degradation is bringing upon us.

¹²For a more extended discussion of the ideas that follow, see my book [The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels](#) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

¹³For this analysis of Paul, see especially Robin Scroggs, [Paul for a New Day](#) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977)

(6) Reframing biblical concepts in eco-justice terms.

New Testament texts clearly do not deal with modern ecological issues, just as it does not deal with so many contemporary issues. Nevertheless, when appropriated, certain central theological ideas can be extended or reframed to address our contemporary environmental situation.

For example, the biblical motif of identification with the least and the oppressed could be extended to encompass nature. Matthew declares that “Insofar as you have done it unto the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me” (25:40). Mark declares that, “Whoever receives one such little child receives me.” Luke states that Jesus “came to seek and to save the last” (19:10). Luke’s overarching theme is about God’s “preferential option for the poor.” Why not include trees, animals, air, and water as oppressed, exploited, dominated, and marginalized creatures with whom God identifies? What would it mean to live with nature in such a way as to serve nature? What would it mean to care for the most vulnerable and endangered species in creation? How would our humane treatment of the least in nature redound to our care for the least of our brothers and sisters? Can we even think about the liberation of humans without also thinking about the liberation of the whole creation in which we are embedded?

Another motif that might be extended is Paul’s concept of justification. Justification by grace meant that human beings do not justify themselves by their works, by their usefulness. Rather, they are justified by God’s gracious act of acceptance in Christ. They are valued for their own sake. And it is living out of such free acceptance by God that human beings can live up to their own nature as beings who act righteously toward others. Similarly, could we not ask what it would mean that other creatures and plants of the earth and the earth itself do not justify themselves by their usefulness to humans. Rather, they are valuable in their own right and should be delighted in for their own sake. As such, delight would be the right basis for our use of them. Such an acceptance of nature “for its own sake” on the part of humans would in turn lead humans to treat nature in such a way that the earth and its creatures would be able to thrive by living up to their natures as well.

Finally, we may consider a concept that could be reframed for relevance. The Gospel of John and the first letter of John make much of the incarnational theology that Jesus became flesh. The first letter of John places it as a theological test: “Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (4:2). Here is a biblical affirmation of the full humanity of Jesus. Yet when we read and interpret this, we generally think of the divine becoming a human being in isolation from the rest of nature. However, when we reframe this in our contemporary environmental context, we have a different understanding of being fully human. To be human is to be a biological creature, to be counted among the animals as a homo sapien, a higher primate, a mammal. It is to recognize that we are all emergent from and dependent on the web of nature. To say this of Jesus, then, is to place him squarely in the context of the whole natural world. To say “Jesus was a mammal” changes the way we think about Jesus and how we think about incarnational theology. God now not only takes the form of a human, God is at the same time taking the form of creatures of the earth and making Jesus a part of nature. God’s incarnation and solidarity are now not just with humans but with all of creation. In I John, the test of whether one believes Jesus came in the flesh is directly related to the capacity to love other people who are in the flesh. In the same way, a test today declaring Jesus to be fully human leads us to measure our love of all creatures of the earth and, indeed, all of nature.

Other theological views and ethical values in scripture may lend themselves to similar reframing.

The New Testament as a manual for facing a possible end to the world.

What do we do with apocalyptic expectations of the New Testament? Most early Christians believed that the end of the world as they knew it was imminent and that soon Christ would return for final judgment and salvation. Perhaps, instead of thinking of apocalyptic as otherworldly and irrelevant to our time, we can see it as analogous to our situation. We too are facing a possible end of the world as we humans know it because of drastic changes that may take place in the earth's environment. Parallels between New Testament apocalyptic expectations and the crises of our own time become obvious and may require of us a radical response.

In the face of a vision of a new world before them, the early Christians did not abandon the present age, nor did they (like we may) expect God to come and clean up their mess. On the contrary, they prepared for the salvation of the new age as a means to enjoy the full blessings of God in the present and as a means to avoid God's judgment. We are in a similar position. On the one hand, if we are not able to repent and change our destruction of the very ecosystems that sustain human life, the consequences will be a judgment upon us. On the other hand, if we are able to repent and create a sustainable life together for future generations on the earth, the results will constitute a transformation that in some sense would represent salvation for all creation.

So, how did the early Christians act in the face of their expectation of the possible end of the world? What can we learn from them? Here are several characteristic behaviors of some early Christians that were shaped by their expectation of the end of the world.

- There was a deep sense of mission, illustrated best by the life of the Apostle Paul and the mission charges in the Gospels (Mark 13:10; Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 24:47). The early Christians had a tremendous urgency to spread the message from village to village, from city to city—to call people and cities and nations to repentance and change of behavior.

- Like Jesus, the early Christians were truth tellers. They made penetrating analyses of the human condition, not just in terms of obvious evil, but in terms of the dark side of our goodness and our compromises. The Sermon on the Mount and the Letter of James illustrate how they sought to discern their own hypocrisy and to face it. They saw evil in themselves and sought to change it. They identified many of the destructive dynamics of their culture (such as the avoidance of people who are ritually defiled) and transformed or replaced them with life-giving stories.

- Many early Christians withdrew and dissociated from the behavior and lifestyles and beliefs of the culture. Mark, for example, urged people to break with cultural values and institutions that were destructive—for example, narrow family loyalties, the quest for wealth, the desire for positions of honor, certain interpretations of the law, the use of power to control people (see especially Mark 8:27-10:45). The author of Revelation admonishes people to withdraw from participation in the social and economic life of idolatrous Rome (Revelation 18:4). In place of participation in the cultures of destruction, the early Christians identified with the values and behavior of the emerging new world of God's kingdom.

- The early Christians confronted the destructive powers, fearlessly challenging their idolatry and hypocrisy. Early Christians, such as those represented in the first three Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the book of Revelation, showed their willingness to risk loss, persecution, and death in order to break with narrow allegiances of survival. They condemned the rulers, embraced a larger allegiance to God's whole world, and were in some cases willing to suffer and die for their convictions.

- They created alternative communities, quite different from the culture around them, such as those reflected in the Johannine writings, the Acts of the Apostles (2:43-47), and the First

Letter of Peter (2:9-10). They did not just make a negative break from the culture, they also created a positive participation in kingdom. They had a vision of the future and sought to live it now in the present. In so far as they lived that vision in the present, the kingdom had come! In this way, the early Christians sought to be a light for the world.

- Like Jesus, they did prophetic acts. In a sense, their lives were prophetic symbols, for every act is a prophetic act when done out of a vision of the future. So healing the sick, feeding the hungry, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, were all prophetic symbols of a new age impinging on the present.

- In all of this, they were willing to act unilaterally, as far as they were able, to create a new world without waiting for the leaders of the nation or the rest of the populace to lead the way or even to agree with them.

Thus, we can study the behavior of the early Christians facing what they believed to be the end of the world as a means to discover alternative behaviors—some of which may be appropriate for us as we face ultimate choices for avoiding ecological disaster and for creating a sustainable life on earth.

Conclusion.

The Bible is a powerful force in our culture. It has been for centuries and will be for a long time to come. People look to the Bible for guidance and for strength. Each generation of Christians must renew its understanding of the Bible in order to face the issues of their time and place. This is acutely true for our generation in relation to our treatment of the environment. Eco-justice Criticism of the Bible can help us address the environmental crisis.

In regard to eco-justice issues, there is much in the New Testament to resist and there is much to celebrate. There is much to be cautious about and there is much that can guide us and empower us for the decisions that lie ahead. To learn from the Bible and to be transformed by what we read is not a matter of some wooden imitation. We live in a world quite different from the biblical world. Our problems take a similar but also a very dissimilar shape. We are called to discern how the various gospels proclaimed by the early church can now address us in the circumstances in which we live, can help us see what God is calling us to do in our time. The New Testament is a resource book for such a vocation, a collection of powerful testimonies to the work of God that authorize us to be creative and that empower us to address our problems in the Environmental Age with courage and with hope.¹⁴

¹⁴To find extensive bibliographical resources on the Bible relevant to Eco-justice Criticism, see footnote 3 above for information about the internet site for The Earth Bible.