Guiding Principles for An Ecojustice Hermeneutic: An Introduction

Norman Habel

Background:

- a. Development of the Principles
- b. Lack of critical use of biblical texts by writers on ecotheology
  - 'It is very much an open question whether a theology based on a fundamentally anthropocentric Scripture can bring us to the awareness that we live on the earth "on the planet's terms and not our own."' (McAfee, 1996, 43)

- c. Our debt to Lynn White - and his critics
  - 'especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.'

- d. Starting with a broad hermeneutical model of suspicion and retrieval
  - suspect a priori that writers and interpreters have been anthropocentric
  - expose dualities or potential dualisms in the text or the interpreting tradition (binary pairing, duality, dualism)
  - retrieve ecojustice traditions that value Earth within a given biblical cosmology (ancient and modern cosmologies)
  - listen for the voice of Earth - as subject or as oppressed

- e. The approach of Gene McAfee (in Theology for Earth Community edited by Hessel)
  - need for interdisciplinary approach to discern the actual physical environment of the writer of the text
  - need for a critical self-consciousness about the relationship of nature and history; was nature a domain of genuine reflection or only a background to events
  - danger of oversimplifying the goodness of creation and the evils of cultural existence, need to explore the dark side of creation
  - need to explore the cause-and-effect relationship of sin and natural evils
  - need to reconsider the notion of human particularity or speciesism and the question of whether we can view Earth on the planet's terms and not ours
  - 'The real issue confronting us with our admittedly anthropocentric Scripture is: what kind of anthropocentrism will we embrace' (p. 43)
1. The Principle of Intrinsic Worth

*The universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value.*

1. Does the text devalue Earth or parts of creation? If so, how and why? Is there an implicit duality (or dualism) which devalues the earth has an inferior present reality over against heaven as a superior spiritual reality.
   1. Duality
      1. Heaven is eternal, superior, locus of the divine, spiritual, holy;
      2. Earth is temporal, inferior, material, locus of mortals, corrupt

2. Texts
   1. Heaven is my throne, earth is my footstool (Isaiah 66.1)
   2. They desire a better country, a heavenly one (Hebrews 11.16)

3. Or does the biblical text accord value and worth to Earth and its components? How and why is Earth invested with value?
   1. Texts
      1. The earth (ēeres) is full of the kabod YHWH (Isaiah 6.3)

2. The Principle of Inter-connectedness

*Earth is a community of inter-connected living things which are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.*

1. Does the text assume a hierarchical relationship between parts of creation? Are living creatures viewed as dependent solely on God and not on each other? Is there a duality which assumes that human life is superior to, and therefore to be preserved at the expense of, all other life? Is there a duality which applauds human culture at the expense of nature? Is the survival or salvation of the individual promoted at the expense of the Earth community and its welfare? Is the text anthropocentric, viewing the worth of Earth primarily in terms of utilitarian purposes for human beings?
1. Dualities
   1. Animal life - instinct, lacking reason, spiritual consciousness, soul
   2. Humans - reason, soul, authority, spirit, language
   3. Nature/creation - material, non-human, dependent, lacking creativity
   4. Culture - creation of human, mind/consciousness, superior

5. Texts
   1. You have given them dominion over the work of your hands (Psalms 8.5)
   2. Cursed is the ground because of you (Genensis 3.17)
   3. Come, let us build ourselves a city (Genesis 11.4)

4. Or does the text view the components of Earth as interconnected and interdependent? If so, in what way? Does this interconnection constitute a community of mutually dependent living things, whose survival is vital?
   1. Texts
      1. Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars? (Job 39.26)

3. The Principle of Voice
   
   Earth is a living entity capable of voicing its cries against injustice

1. Does the text assume a duality between the earth as voiceless, inanimate matter and human beings as superior beings capable of response and worship?
   1. Duality
      1. Human beings - subjects, with voice, mind, capable of worship
      2. Earth - inanimate matter, object, voiceless, without feelings or mind

3. Texts
   1. The Noah... offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor. (Genesis 8.20-21)

2. Or does the text give voice to non-human components of Earth when they suffer injustice
or celebrate God's presence? Does the text view Earth or its components as living realities capable of personal response? If so, in what way?

1. **Texts**
   1. Ask the animals and they will teach you (Job 12.7)
   2. Praise him from the earth, you sea monsters and deeps (Psalms 148.7)

### 4. The Principle of Purpose

The universe, Earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.

1. Does the text assume a duality between Earth, as a this-worldly domain which is disposable, and another other-worldly or spiritual domain, which represents the eternal plan of God?
   1. **Duality**
      1. Other world: eternal, pure, beyond and after this world, 'glorious'
      2. This world: corrupt, disposable, dying, doomed

3. **Texts**
   1. ...and the elements will be dissolved with fire (2 Peter 3.10)
   2. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21.1)

3. Or does the text view Earth and its components as part of an ongoing dynamic design? If so, how is that design articulated? Does the text indicate that the universe, including the earth and its creatures, is moving toward an internal goal and purpose which also embraces the physical earth?
   1. **Texts**
      1. ...never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth (Genesis 9.11)
      2. ...the creation itself shall be set free (Romans 8.21)
5. The Principle of Custodianship

*Earth is a balanced and diverse domain requiring responsible custodians who function as partners with, rather than rulers over, Earth to sustain its balance and diversity.*

1. Is there a duality which links humans with God (above), thereby making them superior rulers, while other living components, as non-humans, are linked to the earth and destined to be ruled or inferior?
   1. Dualities
   1. Humans - appointed as rulers, stewards, subduing the earth
   2. Earth - unruly, chaotic, wilderness, requiring human control

3. Texts
   1. And fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over... (Genesis 1.28)
   2. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth (Genesis 9.2)

3. Who are the custodians of the earth or regions of the earth? God? Humans? Other beings? Other components? Is there any sense of partnership between humans and the earth (or humans and other creatures) in terms of sustaining the earth?
   1. Texts
   1. And put Adam in the garden to till/serve it and keep/protect it (Genesis 2.1)

6. The Principle of Resistance

*Earth and its components not only suffer from human injustices but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.*

1. Does the text view the earth as a passive victim of human or divine actions? Is there a focus exclusively on the sins of humans against God and each other rather than on injustices perpetrated on the natural world?
   1. Texts
   1. I struck you with blight... yet you did not return (Amos 4.9)
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2. Or does the text acknowledge human injustices to the earth? Does the earth struggle against injustices and give voice to its suffering? How is the voice of earth heard? Is the suffering and struggle of the earth linked with the suffering of God or God incarnate? If so, how?

1. Texts
   1. They have made it a desolation... it mourns to me (Jeremiah 12.1)

The Earth Bible: Reading the Bible from the Perspective of the Earth
Diane Jacobson

Thank you. I am very pleased both to be a part of this project and to have the opportunity to offer a few comments today. My remarks will be brief in order to provide a greater opportunity for open conversation about this project.

First, I want to thank Dr. Habel for instigating and taking leadership for this project. Certainly the world is in need of rethinking and changing its environmental ideas and practices. This reality is commonly, if not universally, acknowledged. What is less commonly considered is the central role that the Bible has played historically and continues to play presently in our ecological drama. So this project is not only timely, it is also potentially of great import. I am particularly struck by the reminder by Norman of Lynn White’s comment from 1967, that "especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen." The Earth Bible project provides us with an opportunity to face this reality in a systematic way. The hermeneutical principles as they stand are helpful and challenging. They offer a compelling set of principles for reading and exegeting biblical texts that will, I believe, give rise to any number of interesting, and potentially compelling papers.

My remarks will center on the two different challenges arising from these principles. One challenge comes from what might be considered the deconstructing task and the other challenge from the constructing task implied by the principles.
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The first challenge of the principles I take to be the implied challenge to the Bible's theological adequacy as a witness for eco-justice. This adequacy is to be measured by bringing the six principles to bear. Using a juridical metaphor, one used very effectively by Norm in his own work on the book of Job, this project aims to put the Bible on trial with regards to its handling of, its dealing with the earth. The rules of the trial are the stated principles.

For this task, having specific principles - specific rules of court - is exceedingly helpful. They provide both discipline and specific parameters. They help to keep a scholar from slipping into an apologetic or revisionist reading. One can look at any biblical passage or groups of passages and ask prosecutory questions: Does this passage explicitly deny purpose or intrinsic worth to the earth? Does the earth have voice? Is the earth treated only as an object? Or have historical interpretations of this text been such that the voice or intrinsic worth of the earth has been denied?

This last question presses the point that in evidence is not only what the Bible "means to" or "should" say but also what the history of its use has shown it to say. The reality of abusive reading forms part of the witness against the text, though here one must be careful, because the principles imply that the problem is not merely one of interpretation, the problem is also with Scripture itself. What is called for is a disciplined hermeneutics of suspicion. In a feminist critique of the Bible, the goal is that women become subject rather than object. The goal here is parallel - to reveal biblical objectification and subjugation of women. The goal here is parallel - to reveal biblical objectification and subjugation of the earth. I suspect this latter goal will prove to be even trickier than the former as all biblical readers are stuck, more or less, with the reality of our human perspective.

The second part of my remarks center on the constructive task implied by the principles. Here I begin with a question: do any or all of these six principles find their source in the biblical text itself? That is to ask, might we claim that all or some of these principles are, in fact, biblical principles? One of the strengths of certain feminist critiques of Scripture is that the principles themselves can be said to arise from Scripture. At some level, women have experienced the Bible as liberating, and this level undergirds the principles of feminist exegesis. Feminists tend to point to certain banner passages such as Genesis 1:28 where the created image of God is both male and female, or to Galatians 3:28 where male and female are united in Christ. Or feminists claim their center in certain scriptural principles such as justice, preferential treatment of the poor, or the like. Again I suspect that such a move is more complicated in dealing with eco-justice principles. But a move in this direction is perhaps implied in the "b" sections of comments found under each of the six principles in the handouts. In these sections, emphasis is given to those passages which support the principle in question. Notice however, that the stance of these sections is not that the principles themselves arise from these texts but that these texts support the given principle. Or perhaps, according to the principle, certain texts are
My question wants to take us one step further and ask whether any particular passage or biblical principle actually stands behind the stated eco-justice principle commending it. I ask this not to denigrate the role of experience or science in the formulation of these six principles, but rather to enter into the question of biblical authority in these matters. Perhaps my biblical apologist tendencies are simply irrepressible, but I would claim that we are again embarking on a journey in which Scripture interprets and critiques Scripture. The obvious example in respect to the principle of custodianship is the implicit critique or correct of the *subduing/dominion* language of Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 by the *tilling/serving* language of Genesis 2. In regards to the two principles of intrinsic worth and interconnectedness, I, for one, believe Job, particularly in the lament and the answer of God, interprets and critiques Genesis 1 and other priestly writings. As an aside, one of the very passages most significant in supporting feminist principles, is one of the most problematic passages for eco-justice principles.

As a corollary question to the issue of biblical underpinnings for the six eco-justice principles, I would suggest that other eco-justice principles do arise naturally from the text of the Bible. The two I have in mind are specifically theological, and thus, for reasons that Norm has stated but might further clarify, are perhaps not appropriate for the project. But I give them to you anyway because I think they are worth pursuing. The first is the *Principle of Incarnation*. I would suggest that though the Bible certainly distinguishes between the Creator and the creation, a distinction I would uphold, God is made manifest not only in human beings, but also in other earthen vessels. For example, in Exodus God appears in both a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. The second is the *Principle of Promise*. In the Bible, the earth is also the vehicle of divine promise. Under this category one could take a look at the problematic distinction made by some between eschatology and apocalyptic, with the latter category implying the desirability of the destruction of the world.

I look forward to working on this project. I myself am going to begin by looking at some of the texts in which the Chaos-Kampf tradition is found, centering on Psalms 74, 90, and Isaiah 51, perhaps with some reference to Job and Exodus. For now, I give you (back) to Gene Tucker/Norm Habel.
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