Norman Habel

*The Birth, the Curse and the Greening of Earth: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1–11*

Earth Bible Commentary 1


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For many years Norman Habel has been associated with issues of ecojustice, including detailed biblical exegesis, ethical-theological reflection, the Earth Bible Project, and the production of liturgical resources. This commentary on Gen 1–11 is designed for the reader who is interested in the problems and possibilities that this text presents regarding issues of ecojustice: “if we read Genesis employing an ecological hermeneutics, we discover new dimensions of meaning” (ix). This volume stands in the tradition of Habel’s earlier work on these issues, including: *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009).

This volume is the first in the Earth Bible Commentary series, which is an extension of the multivolume The Earth Bible series published in 2000–2002. Earth is understood to be the central character of Gen 1–11, and it is primarily from Earth’s point of view that Habel moves through this story. Habel defines Earth as “the total ecosystem, the web of life, the domain of nature with which we are familiar, of which we are an integral part and in which we face the future” (3).

The opening chapter is a general introduction to this series and articulates key principles associated with recent ecological hermeneutics (1–16). At the same time, Habel seeks
to move beyond a focus on ecological themes to a process of listening to, and identifying with, Earth as a presence or voice in the text. Our task is to take up the cause of Earth and the non-human members of the Earth community by sensing their presence in the text—whether their presence is suppressed, oppressed or celebrated. We seek to move beyond identifying ecological themes in creation theology to identifying with Earth in its ecojustice struggles (2).

Habel understands that such a “radical ecological approach to the text involves a basic hermeneutic of suspicion, identification and retrieval” (8). Regarding suspicion, “the text is likely to be inherently anthropocentric and/or has traditionally been read from an anthropocentric perspective” (8). Regarding identification, “our aim is to read in solidarity with Earth. We are Earth beings reading in empathy with Earth. … The most obvious dimension of this step is to identify with non-human figures in the narrative, empathizing with their roles, characters and treatment, and discerning their voices” (11). Regarding retrieval, “The task before us is to re-read the text to discern where Earth or members of the Earth community may have suffered, resisted or been excluded by attitudes within the text or in the history of its interpretation. … The aim is to read as Earth beings in tune with Earth, the very source of our being” (13). Generally, “Special attention will be paid to how the natural world is depicted and whether subjects from that world emerge as components that deserve special consideration in terms of the habitat reflected in the textual world” (18).

At the same time, Habel makes clear that “the task before us is not an exploration of what a given text may say about creation, about nature, or about Earth. In this context, Earth is not a topos or theme for analysis. We are not focusing on ecology and creation, or ecology and theology. … An ecological hermeneutic demands a radical change of posture both in relation to Earth as a subject in the text and also our relation to Earth as readers” (3, emphasis original).

To that end, each of the eight major sections of Gen 1–11 that Habel identifies are (usually) approached in terms of (1) Design; (2) Analysis; and (3) Retrieval. While he specifically distinguishes his approach from traditional source and form-critical analysis, his discussions of textual design and his identification of layers in the text, even sharply disagreeing layers, echo such approaches. What he calls the Erets myth and the Adamah myth bear a strong resemblance to major portions of the traditional Priestly and Yahwistic sources. Moreover, these sources are discussed in terms of “origin myth” and “catastrophe myth,” with the understanding that the “recognized laws of nature and relationships do not necessarily apply in the primordial” (19). The interpreter’s “task is to free these myths from their anthropocentric literary framework, and discern their intention as origin or catastrophic myths” (22).
Habel’s sharpest exception to traditional source analysis is his separating out of the image of God texts (Gen 1:26–28; 5:1–2; 9:1–7) into a third basic source, which he calls the Tselem myth. Besides these three myths, the genealogies are identified as a “framework,” giving shape to an anthropocentric orientation, while “fragments” such as Gen 6:1–4; 9:20–27; and 11:1–9 are included among “a handful of transitional legends” (21).

Special attention should be given to Habel’s assessment of the Tselem myth, which is understood to stand in sharp contrast to the content of the other two myths, especially with its anthropocentric emphasis. Habel considers the text of the creation of ’adam to be a “deviation or rupture” within Gen 1:1–2:4a, interrupting the focus on the nonhuman world. Two quotations suggest his perspective. Genesis 1:26–28 is “a violation of the role of the central character of the story. Earth is no longer a partner; Earth is an object of subjugation. Living creatures are no longer the celebrated progeny of Earth, but creatures to be dominated by humans” (26). In a “Retrieval” section, Habel represents the voice of Erets speaking as follows: “these image creatures were given a mandate from Elohim to ‘subdue’ me as if I were a wild beast, an enemy, or a violent force to be controlled. By so doing Elohim discarded me as a partner and handed me over for humans to abuse” (45).

Habel makes no special effort to understand the Genesis text in its present form or to offer the perspective of the final redactor (though the genealogies give signs of that with their anthropocentric perspective). Highlighting the tensions among the various myths is a more basic concern. For example, Gen 2:15 and 1:26–28 are “diametric opposites.” The latter’s “mandate to dominate incorporates verbs that are ecologically destructive, while the verbs in 2:15 are ecologically positive; the two traditions are mutually exclusive” (53). One wonders what interpretation might have emerged if questions like the following had been asked: What voice, and what status, does the work of the final redactor have? Or, more specifically, how would the final redactor have understood the place of Gen 1:26–28 within Gen 1–2?

The language Habel uses to speak of Gen 1:26–28 seems to this reader to be insufficiently grounded and studies of this text that would cut against the language of “domination” insufficiently considered. For example, kabash is used in Gen 1:28 in a pre–sin context. Does that affect our interpretation of its meaning compared to later usage? From another angle, one thinks of destructive actions by nature itself (earthquakes, volcanoes, etc.). The world that God created included natural disasters, integral to the world’s becoming. Also, the high levels of violence among living nonhuman creatures in God’s good but not perfect prehuman (and hence pre-sin) creation could be more recognized. Earth has forever lived with the effects of a divine decision to create such a messy world—in the interests of maximal creativity. As such, positively, the natural order is a major participant in the becoming of the world (adding to Habel’s point about Earth’s
creativity). Why would not the word “subdue” be appropriate for relating to such a violent, creative natural order, indeed, finally, be in the best interests of Earth?

Built into the God-created orders of Earth, much potential exists for suffering and damage (human sin intensifies that potential). Do we know whether other creational options for God would have been better for Earth? One might wish for more recognition that Earth, created by God, is a *dangerous* place for human and nonhuman creatures alike. One thinks of water or the law of gravity. That creation also includes floods, though not at the depth and breadth of the flood depicted in Gen 1–11. More attention could have been given to this intensified flood as a morally grounded disaster, understanding its severity in terms of the consequences of sin that are *intrinsic* to the deed (Gen 6:11–13).

God cannot be let off the hook, for such effects are a manifestation of the natural moral order that God established for Earth. Moreover, God certainly mediates the judgment, using agents, agents who are not controlled by God. At the same time, is the oft-used language of “punishment” ever appropriate with God as the subject? Habel repeatedly makes reference to the flood as a divine “overreaction,” indeed an “unjustified divine overreaction” (83–85). At the same time, “the flood is a failure” (104), in view of which God makes changes, including the reversal of the curse and the greening of the earth (8:21–22). Regarding another judgment text (Gen 3:14–19), Habel speaks of “the cruelty of God’s punishment” (61). He claims that “the enlightenment of humans is translated by God into the devaluation of nature” (62). At the same time, interestingly, Gen 3:19 is not a part of the curse, “but a homecoming.” Adamah welcomes human beings “into her arms in death” (62).

Among many details worth pondering, Earth is a “co-agent with God” and “God’s partner in the creation of all life on Earth” (51). Or, in view of Gen 2:1–3, “God is in, with, and under time as God is in, with, and under the rest of creation” (42). Or, a positive view of the snake is presented: “To declare the snake devious in any way is to devalue one of the children of Adamah…. The snake does not lie” (57–58). Such provocative comments are manifold.

In conclusion, I am pleased with the way Habel addresses many issues. He exhibits an honesty that is refreshing, showing that the biblical texts are more troubling ecologically than commonly recognized. He addresses ethical-theological issues directly, and his work will generate valuable conversations across disciplines. Whatever one might think of the earth-orientation of Habel’s commentary, his work brings an important issue before

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readers and will occasion many a reflection from an angle of vision different from the usual approach. This volume is imaginative both in its proposal and in its expression.