

## Ecological Appropriation of Joel

Neil W. Bergmann<sup>1</sup>

---

**Abstract:** *Most modern ecological-hermeneutical approaches to biblical interpretation of prophetic texts have concentrated on identifying the ecological significance of the text in its original historical context. Given the urgency of concerns about the modern ecological crisis, there is also a need to use scripture to assist in development of contemporary environmental ethics within an industrialised society. This paper describes a technique called ecological appropriation which seeks to take a biblical text, in this case the book of Joel, and apply its message to modern ecological concerns, whilst still preserving its fundamental theological message. This technique yields new insights into an appropriate, biblically-inspired response to the ecological crisis which involves key steps of acknowledgement, mourning, repentance, judgement, return to God, and restoration.*

---

**Key Words:** Joel; hermeneutics; exegesis; eco-theology; environmental ethics; speech act theory

---

There is concern in the community in general, and among Christians in particular, about what will be referred to in this paper as the ecological crisis, i.e., the harm done to non-human creation by modern, industrialised society. Over the last half century, there has been a concerted effort to examine how the Bible can be used as a resource for Christians in responding to this crisis. However, this has met with only limited success. In part, this can be blamed on an emphasis on using the Bible only for establishing orthodoxy, i.e., right thinking, with a flawed assumption that orthodoxy will lead to orthopraxy, i.e., right action. Instead, this paper explicitly investigates this step from orthodoxy to orthopraxy, with the goal of using the Bible to inform the actions of a faith community in response to the modern ecological crisis. Insights from Speech-Act Theory will be used to examine how the ancient biblical text can be appropriated for action in the face of contemporary problems. This new approach will be applied to the Old Testament book of Joel, which describes a prophetic response to an ancient environmental crisis.

The paper is structured as follows. First, existing approaches to using the Bible in environmental ethics are analysed to identify where some new, complementary approaches can be useful. Next, a novel analytical approach, called here ecological appropriation, is motivated, explained and justified. This is followed by a detailed analysis of Joel, and finally some conclusions on the method in general and Joel in particular are drawn.

---

<sup>1</sup> This work was undertaken as a minor thesis in the MA (Theology) program at Australian Catholic University. Many thanks to my project supervisor, Dr Jason Lecureux, Trinity Theological College, Brisbane, for his enthusiastic and insightful comments and guidance.

## BACKGROUND

While Christians have always delighted in God's good creation, the birth of modern academic eco-theology can be seen as a response to an influential 1967 article by Lynn White, in *Science*, which laid the blame for the ecological crisis on Western Christianity, and urged a return to a Franciscan style of spirituality.<sup>2</sup> After analysing western views of science and technology, and their relationship to creation, he concluded as follows.

We would seem to be headed toward conclusions unpalatable to many Christians. Since both science and technology are blessed words in our contemporary vocabulary, some may be happy at the notions, first, that, viewed historically, modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology and, second, that modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature. But, as we now recognize, somewhat over a century ago science and technology ... joined to give mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecologic effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt.<sup>3</sup>

Theologians immediately looked to their Bibles to refute White's claim, but instead found some key texts which on the surface are not easily reconciled with care for creation.

In Genesis 1:28, humans are called to fill the earth, and subdue it, and to have dominion over all living things. Interpretations of this text vary widely. In the view of some, such as Westermann, dominion means "wise stewardship."<sup>4</sup> In the view of others, this text suggests a view of an almost antagonistic creation, which requires human ingenuity and technology to tame and make useful. Habel interprets "dominion" as "harsh control."<sup>5</sup>

The same message is reflected in Psalm 8:4-5. Humans have been appointed to rule over creation, which could lead to a view that non-human creation is to be judged in terms of how well it serves the needs of humanity. Again, interpretations vary widely.<sup>6</sup>

The apocalyptic message in 2 Peter 3:10-13 suggests that this earth is going to be destroyed and the fall of earth is seen as part of the eschatological process. If a new, better earth will be coming, there is little need to take care of the old earth. Extreme

---

<sup>2</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967): 1203-1207.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1207.

<sup>4</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, trans. David E. Orton (Edinburgh:T&T Clark, 1988)

<sup>5</sup> Norman C. Habel, "Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1," in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 34-38.

<sup>6</sup> For example, many commentators explicitly accept that humans are granted dominion over nature, e.g., in Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, "Between Text & Sermon: Psalm 8," *Interpretation* 59 (2005): 392-394 the author states: "there is no way to escape the psalmist's view that God grants dominion to human beings." James L. Mays, "What is a Human Being: Reflections on Psalm 8," *Theology Today* 50 (1994): 511-520 argues that humans cannot return to a harmonious ecological relationship with nature and must deal with the position of control of nature and technology in which they find themselves. Keith Carley, "Psalm 8: An Apology for Domination," in *Readings from the Prospective of Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 111-124, rejects the view that this text legitimises human domination of nature.

interpretations even see this text as commanding Christians to speed the Earth's destruction.<sup>7</sup>

David Horrell's wide-ranging recent work on ecological hermeneutical approaches provides a very useful classification of different ecological readings of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> His first category is Readings of Recovery, which attempt to show that problematic texts can be reconstructed so that, for example, dominion over earth is understood as wise stewardship. The Green Bible is one example of this approach, where ecologically friendly texts are marked in green, with accompanying devotional reflections.<sup>9</sup> However, such an approach tends to gloss over the problems with the texts. Horrell concludes that the Green Bible "fails to do justice to the fact that the biblical material is, as on other ethical issues, profoundly ambivalent, requiring careful and constructive interpretation which is, in turn, open to debate and contestation."<sup>10</sup> Habel has recently published an entire monograph disputing whether a green reading of the Bible is possible, in which he states: "In this volume, I dare to face the reality that the Bible is an inconvenient text that includes not only 'green' texts but 'grey texts' – texts that do not reflect a genuine concern for creation or empathy for earth."<sup>11</sup>

Next, Horrell classifies some approaches as Readings of Resistance. These acknowledge that there are conflicts between modern environmental ethics and some biblical texts. Most Readings of Resistance give precedence to extra-biblical environmental ethics and review Bible texts with this lens, in a similar fashion to some feminist readings that test the Bible against modern interpersonal ethical principles. The best known example is the Earth Bible project, which examines texts through the lens of six extra-biblical eco-justice principles, developed in conjunction with environmentalists, ethicists and theologians. The principles are Intrinsic Worth, Interconnectedness, Voice, Purpose, Mutual Custodianship and Resistance.<sup>12</sup> The Earth Bible project has been extended by a Society of Biblical Literature Consultation, which suggested a hermeneutical approach based on the steps of suspicion of bias, identification with creation, and retrieval of the true message.<sup>13</sup> A problem with such Readings of Resistance is that judging the value of a biblical text based on extra-biblical eco-justice principles is not consistent with a conventional theological tradition of exegesis. Many of the Earth Bible Project readings do make use of conventional exegetical techniques to correctly deliver conclusions that many texts are not earth-friendly. However, it is the subsequent response to these unfriendly texts that some find problematic. Horrell concludes that "such an approach eschews any

---

<sup>7</sup> See Constance E. Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and our Coming Age of Barbarism* (Shreveport: Huntington House, 1983) and Dave Hunt, *Peace Prosperity and the Coming Holocaust: The New Age Movement in Prophecy* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1983), who are both fundamentalist authors who see environmentalism as part of a (satanic) New Age agenda.

<sup>8</sup> David G. Horrell, Cheryl Hunt and Christopher Southgate, "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: a Typology of Hermeneutical Stances," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21 (2008): 219-238.

<sup>9</sup> *The Green Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> David G. Horrell, "The Green Bible: A Timely Idea Deeply Flawed," *Expository Times* 121 (2010): 180-186.

<sup>11</sup> Norman C. Habel, *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?*, (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009), i.

<sup>12</sup> Norman C. Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible," in *Readings from the Prospective of Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 31.

<sup>13</sup> Norman C. Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1-8.

attempt to *show* how these [eco-justice] values can emerge (or indeed have emerged) from a (particular) reading of the tradition, and thus, crucially, severely limits its ability to be *persuasive* for those within that tradition.”<sup>14</sup>

The most useful outcome of the SBL consultation was the notion of Earth Community, or what Hilary Marlowe has recently called an “Ecological Triangle,”<sup>15</sup> which has been used as a model by many recent eco-theologians. Right relationship is not just desired between God and Humanity but also between Humanity and non-human Creation, and between God and Creation. Breakdown in any one relationship affects the others.

It is also worth very briefly mentioning the opposite type of Readings of Resistance, which give precedence to the Bible as anti-environmentalist, such as extreme interpretations of the 2 Peter 3:10-13 text as a call to hasten Earth’s destruction. However such views have little mainstream academic support.<sup>16</sup>

Horrell’s analysis finds problems with all these approaches, and he suggests a new approach which is “an attempt to construct an ecological theology which, while innovative, is nonetheless coherent ... with a scripturally shaped Christian orthodoxy.”<sup>17</sup> His new approach has three dimensions.<sup>18</sup> First, exegesis needs to recognise the historical context in which the biblical texts were generated. One simply cannot take texts out of their context and apply them directly to modern issues. Second, interpretation needs to be informed by theological tradition, which includes appropriate attention to the authority of scripture. At the same time, theological tradition should always be in a state of self-examination and self-reflection. Third, biblical interpretation needs to engage with the best contemporary science and ethics.

Horrell’s approach also builds on Conradie’s notion of doctrinal lenses.<sup>19</sup> All exegetical undertakings are views from a certain theological and social context, and a doctrinal lens attempts to provide a consistent theological viewpoint by bringing certain biblical texts into sharp focus and blurring or giving less weight to others. Traditional examples of doctrinal lenses are Luther’s “justification by faith alone” or Calvin’s “sovereignty of God.” Horrell proposes some lenses that might be useful for eco-theology: the goodness of all creation, humanity as part of the community of creation, interconnectedness in failure and in flourishing, the covenant with all creation, creation’s calling to praise God, and liberation and reconciliation for all things.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Horrell, Hunt and Southgate, “Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology,” 223.

<sup>15</sup> Hilary Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109.

<sup>16</sup> Horrell, Hunt and Southgate, “Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology,” 228.

<sup>17</sup> David G. Horrell, “Introduction,” in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. David G. Horell, Cheryl Hunt and Francesca Stavropoulou (London:T&T Clark, 2010), 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> David G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment* (London:Equinox, 2010), 125-126. Horrell’s appeal to Christian orthodoxy is somewhat problematic, because of the lack of a clear consensus on what such a term means. For example, a Protestant scriptural orthodoxy is quite different to a Catholic scriptural orthodoxy. However, his three dimensions provide a good explanation of his particular view of orthodoxy.

<sup>19</sup> Ernst M. Conradie, “What on Earth is an Ecological Hermeneutics? Some Broad Parameters,” in *Ecological Hermeneutics*, 298.

<sup>20</sup> Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment*, 125-126.

The work described in this paper is complementary to these existing approaches, since it addresses a different problem – the question of how to turn intellectual knowledge about an environmental crisis into committed action. It is novel, in that it explicitly uses biblical texts to assist this process.

#### ECOLOGICAL APPROPRIATION OF BIBLICAL TEXTS

A major issue in current environmental ethics in developed nations is how to encourage western, industrialised citizens to take responsibility for the environment.<sup>21</sup> The answer is not found in simply presenting clear intellectual knowledge about the ecological crisis.

A useful idea for categorising the psychological disconnect between intellectual knowledge, heartfelt passion, and enthusiastic action that is particularly relevant to environmental ethics is the 3H framework.<sup>22</sup> This acknowledges that ethical responses occur in three stages from Head to Heart to Hands. A majority of people already have “head knowledge” about the importance of creation, and care for the environment. However, it has proven difficult to translate this into “heart knowledge” based on a commitment to developing a right relationship with creation. This is a necessary step before people can meaningfully engage in “hands-on” action. This paper investigates what biblical interpretation can do to help with the Head to Heart step.

On a more theoretical level, this work uses notions from Speech Act Theory, pioneered by Austin.<sup>23</sup> In Speech Act Theory, words are not just statements, but speakers can do things with words using so-called “Performative Utterances.” For example, in a liturgical sense, words are used to confess faith, to confess sins, to forgive, to consecrate, and to bless. In a spiritual or devotional sense, biblical texts can be used to accuse, to lament, to repent, to forgive, to restore, to praise and to worship.

More recently Richard Briggs explores the use of Speech Act Theory in biblical analysis.<sup>24</sup> Briggs finds that Speech Act Theory is not a widely used analytical tool, because at some level, all words do something, so speech acts fail to divide texts into the clear categories preferred by analytic philosophers. Speech act theory is most useful for texts which are what Briggs calls “strongly self-involving” where speech acts change the relationship between those in the conversation. Briggs applies his methodology to selected texts, which are all in the New Testament. However, his analysis is largely synchronic in the world of the text. He doesn’t extend his analysis to the biblical reader’s use of scripture in a self-involving way, i.e., as a personal liturgy for expressing lament, repentance or praise.

---

<sup>21</sup> There is much that can be learnt from traditional, indigenous cultures, for example from Australian aboriginal culture. “For Aboriginal people the health of land and water is central to their culture. Land is also their ‘home’, is their mother, is steeped in their culture, gives them the responsibility to care for it.” from “Meaning of land to Aboriginal people, Accessed 23 September, 2012. <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/meaning-of-land-to-aboriginal-people>.

<sup>22</sup> Mohammed Abu-Nimer, “Conflict Resolution, Culture and Religion: Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding,” *Journal of Peace Research* 38 (2001): 689.

<sup>23</sup> John L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

<sup>24</sup> Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

Previous approaches to eco-theology have predominantly addressed the problem of developing a biblically-inspired doctrine of our relationship with creation, and to make declarative statements about the appropriate human responses to the current ecological crisis. Instead, this paper approaches the Bible as a resource to also stimulate emotional and spiritual senses as part of a meaningful ethical engagement with the ecological crisis.

The new technique in this project is based on ecological appropriation of biblical texts. Appropriation of biblical texts means that the texts are applied outside of their original historical context to give insight to new issues, in this case to ecological issues. The reader is asking a particular question of the text, viz., how to understand and ethically respond to the modern environmental crisis. The validity and usefulness of the appropriated texts depends on maintaining a meaningful link to the original theological context.

A key aspect of the analysis is the doctrinal lens that is used to provide a framework for analysis, and here the widespread notion of “Earth Community” is used, which emphasises the tripartite relationship between God, humanity and non-human creation. For this ecological appropriation, the goal is to use the biblical text to restore relationships within Earth-Community, and also to shift ecological concern from Head to Heart.

As with any imaginative re-reading, there is a substantial danger that the texts are used to simply reinforce the existing mind-set of the exegete. Like all exegesis, the technique is most successful when the reader doesn’t simply look for reinforcement of existing ecological viewpoints, but rather listens to the text with an open mind (and heart), perhaps finding surprising new answers.

#### PREVIOUS ECO-THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF PROPHETIC BOOKS

There are an increasing number of academic contributions to eco-theological analysis of prophetic books. Marlow has done an extensive study of the relationship between biblical prophets and environmental ethics.<sup>25</sup> Her exegetical approach is similar to that of Horrell mentioned earlier. Rather than judge the texts against an external yardstick such as the Earth Bible’s eco-justice principles,<sup>26</sup> she feels that “it is important to let the texts speak for themselves, and in so doing to discover the differences in emphasis between books and indeed the tensions inherent within individual texts.”<sup>27</sup> She uses an “ecological triangle” of God, Humanity and Non-human Creation as an interpretive lens,<sup>28</sup> which is similar to the notion of “Earth Community” proposed by Habel and his collaborators.<sup>29</sup> Marlow uses three questions to guide interpretation within this ecological triangle framework:

1. What understanding of the non-human creation (whether cosmic or local) does the text present?
2. What assumptions are made about [God]’s relationship to the created world and how he acts within it?

---

<sup>25</sup> Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*.

<sup>26</sup> Habel, “Introducing the Earth Bible,” 24-37.

<sup>27</sup> Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, 109.

Like Horrell’s use of the word orthodox, Marlow’s aim of letting “texts speak for themselves” is problematic. A key insight of postmodern biblical criticism is that all readings are subjective and contextual.

<sup>28</sup> Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, 109.

<sup>29</sup> Habel, “Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics,” 1-8.



3. What effect do the actions and choices of human beings have on the non-human creation and vice versa?<sup>30</sup>

Marlow selects three prophetic texts to analyse in detail using this framework– First Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. In Amos, she concludes that “non-human creation performs a significant role in demonstrating the powerful and all-encompassing nature of God.”<sup>31</sup> Natural disasters are used as a warning from God to his people to signal God’s displeasure, while fertility and abundance are signs of God’s renewed favour. Marlow argues that Hosea concentrates more on the relationship between God and Humanity, and that breakdown in this relationship is signalled by devastation in the natural world.<sup>32</sup> In Marlow’s view, First Isaiah deals more openly with the relationship between Humanity and non-human Creation. Disobedience breaks down the God-Humanity relationship, and as a result also breaks down the Humanity-Creation relationship. Harmonious relations between God and Humanity are reflected by restoration of the links between Humanity and non-human Creation.<sup>33</sup>

Braaten has produced several publications investigating the theme of land in the Book of the Twelve. As part of the Earth Bible Project, Braaten analyses Earth Community in Hosea, where both humans and the Earth are punished for turning away from God.<sup>34</sup> When humans use the land to grow offerings for false gods, the Earth is implicated in this sin. After punishment, repentance and restoration, Braaten believes that a new creation order is established. God creates a new covenant “with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground” (Hos 2:18, NIV). Braaten sees the significance of Hosea 2 to the modern environmental crisis as offering a choice – will we treat the Earth as a land of whoredom, subservient to our own false Gods of violence, greed and consumerism, or will we treat the Earth as provider of life and mediator of God’s blessings?

In a recent work, Braaten specifically addresses an eco-theological interpretation of Joel.<sup>35</sup> He takes an extreme interpretive position of assuming, wherever possible, that pronouns refer to the Earth – what he calls a geocentric reading. For example, in 1:19 “To you, O LORD,<sup>36</sup> I call,” the first person pronoun is interpreted as the Earth calling out. This geocentric approach serves to highlight the possible role of the Earth as a character in Joel. He sees that both the Earth and Humanity have a broken relationship with God. God sends a locust plague (Joel 1:4,6), and the Earth suffers (1:7,10), and the Earth mourns (1:18-20). There is a prophetic cry for the people and for the Earth to repent. The Earth indeed cries out in repentance. God relents, and his people and the Earth are restored. However Braaten’s close reading shows that while the Earth cries out for restoration, it is not clear that the people have entirely repented. The Earth Community of God-Humanity-Creation

---

<sup>30</sup> Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, 109.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>34</sup> Laurie J. Braaten, “Earth Community in Hosea 2,” in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 185-203.

<sup>35</sup> Laurie J. Braaten, “Earth Community in Joel: A Call to Identify with the Rest of Creation,” in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 63-74.

<sup>36</sup> Because of sensitivities to the use of the tetragrammaton in written English, it has been replaced by “God”, “the LORD” or “O LORD” as appropriate.

is restored, but the lingering tensions still remain.<sup>37</sup> Braaten's analysis provides a very interesting interpretation of the role that non-human creation actively plays in the restoration of right relationships with God. Earth actively suffers, mourns and repents when relationships are broken, and Earth rejoices and praises restoration with fertility and abundance. However, Braaten fails to take the next step and relate lessons from the historical, prophetic message of Joel directly to the modern environmental crisis as effectively as his analysis of Hosea has done.

## STRUCTURE OF JOEL

This new ecological appropriation technique will be used with Joel, the second in the Book of the Twelve (Minor Prophets). The dating of Joel is uncertain, which lends itself to more universal application. Joel records a prophetic response to a locust plague which has struck the land. Joel is heavy with references to the earth, animals and plants, and includes significant proto-apocalyptic imagery around the Day of the LORD. Joel describes an ancient ecological crisis, and examines this crisis theologically. These elements suggest it is potentially a rich source of wisdom for the current ecological crisis.

Joel is a short book, 73 verses long, and it can be divided into eight sections, as follows: Lament Over the Ruin of the Land (1:2-12), A Call to Repentance and Prayer (1:13-20), The Day of the LORD and his Army (2:1-11), A Call to Return to God (2:12-17), God's Response and Promise (2:18-27), the Day of the LORD (2:28-32), God's Judgement of the Nations (3:1-16), and Restoration (3:17-21).<sup>38</sup> For each section some comments will be made about the historical-critical analysis of the section before moving to the ecological appropriation.

### LAMENT OVER THE RUIN OF THE LAND (1:2-12)

The first section of Joel refers to the effects of a devastating locust plague which has left the land barren. The scale of the disaster is unprecedented, "has anything like this ever happened in your days?" (Joel 1:2). The series of successive attacks by different locusts in 1:4 suggests all vegetation has been destroyed. 1:7 specifically mentions destroyed vines and fig trees, 1:10 includes the destruction of grain, vineyards, and olive oil, and 1:11-12 adds wheat, barley, pomegranates, palms and apple trees.

The destruction of grain, wine and oil are particularly significant, since their abundance is a mark of covenant blessings (Deut 7:13), and they have particular importance in sacrificial tithe offerings that are to be eaten in God's presence (Deut 12:17-18). The crop failure of grain, wine and oil by locust, worm and disease are signs of covenant curses (Deut 28: 38-40), as is their destruction by an invading nation (Deut 28: 51). The description of the locusts as a nation invading God's land (Joel 1:6) reinforces the links to covenant disobedience.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Braaten, "Earth Community in Joel," 73.

<sup>38</sup> English Bible numbering is used here, rather than the Hebrew numbering. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* refers to the English 2:28-32 as chapter 3, and the English chapter 3 becomes chapter 4.

<sup>39</sup> The views of commentators have varied considerably over time. Julius A. Brewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Joel and Obadiah*, (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1911) interprets the locusts as a plague sent by God to warn of the coming Day of the LORD – a day of God's judgement. Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) believes the locusts are a prototype of God's eschatological army, also



The rhetorical structure of this section alternates sets of imperatives (hear, listen, tell (1:2-3); wake up, weep, wail (1:5); mourn (1:8); and despair, wail, grieve (1:11)) with declarative statements about the scale and impact of the destruction and desolation (1:4, 1:6-7, 9-10, 12).

There are three key insights that emerge when the original text is used to frame a response to the modern environmental crisis. First is the notion of broken covenant relationships. While the curses in Joel explicitly relate to the Deuteronomic covenant between God and Israel, there is a broader view among modern eco-theologians of the importance of a three-way covenant between God, humanity and non-human creation.<sup>40</sup> This is partly based on the Noahic covenant, an “everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that in on the earth” (Gen 9:16). The responsibility of humankind when banished from Eden is “to the till the land from which he was taken” (Gen 3:23). Even the previously mentioned texts which might be used to indicate the primacy of humanity over creation (Gen 1:28, Ps 8:4-5) can be equally seen as reiterating the existence of a covenantal link. Church leaders such as Pope Benedict XVI have also embraced this language, referring to “that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the environmental crisis can be seen as a covenantal problem, and such problems are fundamentally relationship problems, in this case between the members of Earth Community.

The second insight comes from the alternating rhetorical structure of this passage. The declarative sections (1:4, 1:6-7, 9-10, 12) point out the existence and significance of the relevant historical environmental destruction, especially in light of covenant blessings and curses. For modern Christians, there is first a need to acknowledge the extent and significance of modern environmental problems, and to observe where obligations to care for the land have been broken. Issues like species extinction, destruction of habitat, desertification of farmland and environmental pollution all need to be stated and acknowledged. In Joel, these observations are intermingled with imperative calls to respond appropriately. The calls are of three types. The first is a call to “hear” and “give ear” (1:2), meaning to pay close attention and to contemplate, because nothing like this has previously happened. Our modern ecological crisis is unprecedented, and needs to be closely attended to. The second call is to “wake up, you drunkards” (1:5). In modern terms, this drunkenness relates to a lethargic indifference to an inequitable consumerist society that provides short-term comfort and ease, but in the long-term leads to conflict and disaster. The final call is to mourn, despair and grieve. Once the ecological crisis is seen after waking up from comfortable Western lethargy, the appropriate next action is to mourn at the damage done, and for the suffering of much of creation.

---

related to God’s judgement of Israel. G. W. Ahlstrom, *Joel and the Temple Cult of Jerusalem* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 29, states that the locust plague is due “to the people’s transgression of the covenant ordinances.” Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, Vol 1, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000) does not see the locust plague as related to covenant issues, but rather as a precursor to a foreign army invasion, from which the people cry to God for deliverance.

<sup>40</sup> Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment*, 132-133.

<sup>41</sup> Benedict XVI, Message for the Celebration of World Day of Peace, 1 January, 2008, Accessed October 13, 2012. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20071208\\_xli-world-day-peace\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20071208_xli-world-day-peace_en.html).

Mourning is expressed in Joel in very emotional terms, and modern mourning also needs to reach to a deep emotional level, if the head-to-heart step of environmental ethical response is to be successful. A common mistake in ethics is to assume that humans are purely rational creatures, and that if humans are convinced intellectually that an action is correct they will follow it. Joel reminds its readers about spending sufficient time on observing that there really is an ecological crisis, and to connect to that crisis through lament. Only when hearts as well as intellects are engaged will passionate action follow.

### A CALL TO REPENTANCE AND PRAYER (1:13-20)

The next section repeats many of the themes in the first section, and has a similar rhetorical structure. The section consists of imperative calls to action intermixed with more declarative statements about the nature of the disaster.

In terms of declarative statements, grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld (1:13), with the same covenant symbolism. The other covenant symbols mentioned as offerings in Deut 12:17 are “the firstlings of your herds and your flocks.” Deut 28: 51 also states that “your cattle and the issue of your flock” will not increase as a covenant curse. Joel 1:18 describes the suffering of sheep and cattle to further emphasise the covenant implications. The locust plague of the earlier section appears to be compounded by a drought in this section, and drought is also a covenant curse (Deut 28: 24).

The imperatives in this section change from the personal, introspective hearing and mourning to more action-oriented commands. “Put on sackcloth” (1:13) is not just a sign of mourning, it is also a symbol of repentance. Fasting, and crying out to the LORD (1:14) and calling to the LORD (1:19) are also symbols of repentance.

This section also introduces the proto-apocalyptic “Day of the LORD” (1:15). The Day of the LORD is a common theme throughout the Book of the Twelve. Unlike the New Testament concept of a unique, eschatological day of judgement, the Old Testament Day of the LORD is normally understood as one of many times in history when God’s judgements (blessings or curses) are passed upon his people, based on their obedience or disobedience to his covenant.<sup>42</sup> Judgement is also passed on the nations, depending on their treatment of God’s people. The locust plague and drought, as covenant curses, are indications that covenant relationships are strained and that further judgement is likely unless there is a return to the LORD, leading to the ultimate curse that “the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods” (Deut 28:64). The modern implications of the Day of the LORD will be explored in the next section.

In terms of our modern ecological crisis, the section represents a transition from a call to mourning, to a call to repentance. Moreover, the call to action moves from individuals to the community. Today’s people of God are likewise encouraged to “call a sacred assembly ... and cry out to the LORD” (1:14). Special responsibility in Joel is placed on priests, ministers and elders. Today, the church community, and particularly its ordained and lay leaders, are called to ecological repentance. The environmental crisis is identified as not just a political or social problem, it is identified as a religious problem.

---

<sup>42</sup> “Day of the Lord,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1998), 196-197.

## THE DAY OF THE LORD AND HIS ARMY (2:1-11)

In Joel 2, the Day of the LORD that is foreshadowed in 1:15 is now imminent. 2:1-11 has proven to be a very difficult passage to interpret. The Day of the LORD is portrayed as a destructive army which lays waste to the land. There is debate about whether the army refers to a human army from either Babylon or Assyria, or whether it refers to another locust plague that ravages the land, or whether it is God's eschatological host.<sup>43</sup>

In this ecological appropriation of the text, the literal interpretation is less important since the focus of interest is on the theological implications of the text. The references to ecological destruction in this text are clear: "before them the land is like the garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste" (1:3). The modern industrial-scale destruction of the environment has clear parallels to this text. Large-scale clear-felling of forests for agriculture or mining appears very much like a destructive army moving across the landscape. In our modern setting, the Day of the LORD can be visualised as the final outcome of continued ecological destruction. Without a change of heart and action, the earth will continue to be destroyed, and eventually the actions of an ecologically reckless society will need to be accounted for.

The role of God in this judgement is particularly noteworthy, since "the LORD thunders at the head of his army" (2:11a). This suggests that God is not a disinterested observer of Earth's destruction, or that God is fighting on behalf of Earth against its destruction. Rather, this text suggests that God is leading the destruction. The Day of the LORD is a time when God intervenes in human affairs to render judgements of blessings or curses. If humanity does not return to right relationship with God and with the Earth, then the judgement that God passes will be the continued destruction of the environment. "The Day of the LORD is great, it is dreadful. Who can endure it?" (2:11b).

## A CALL TO RETURN TO GOD (2:12-17)

Having emphasised that ecological stewardship is not just a moral or ethical issue, but rather an issue that has real practical implications for the future quality of earthly life, the text again makes a call to "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning" (2:12). This section repeats many of the imperatives of 1:13-20. Joel 2:13 asks the listeners to "rend your hearts and not your garments." "Heart" as a metaphorical concept in the Old Testament has a wide range of meanings, all related to the personal, inner life – it can mean personality, intellect, memory, emotions or will, and can be summed up as the complete inner life of a person.<sup>44</sup> In this context, in terms of rending one's heart, it has a similar meaning to its use in the 3H framework – the heart represents the beliefs to which one is spiritually and emotionally committed. Meaningful progress on ecological sustainability requires a real change of heart, in the Hebrew sense of the word. The whole inner being (mind, will, emotions) needs to be realigned towards restoration. This is not just a change of heart towards the environment, but a change of heart towards God, so that all relationships in Earth Community are restored. The call for a change of heart, and for a return to God is urgent – even the nursing mothers and newlyweds are called to join the assembly (2:16). Environmental action needs to happen in community,

<sup>43</sup> See Pablo R. Andiñach, "The Locusts in the Message of Joel," *Vetus Testamentum* 42, (1992): 433-441.

<sup>44</sup> Alex Luc, "4213: *lēb*, heart," In *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 2:749-754.

and that community needs to include all – not just those who have time, or those with a particular interest.

This section also foreshadows that a return to God can avert the destruction of the Day of the LORD, and can even result in a blessing (2:14a). The images of grain and drink offerings represent the restoration of covenant relationships (2:14b). God does not primarily seek punishment but rather seeks restoration.

### GOD'S RESPONSE AND PROMISE (2:18-27)

The next section, 2:18-32, steps forward in its viewpoint to a time when the people have returned to God, and God provides the answer to their prayers in the form of blessings and restoration. Importantly, God's compassion extends to both the land and the people: "the LORD was jealous for his land and took pity on his people" (2:18).

Restoration of Earth Community brings blessings to the people through the restoration of a fruitful creation. Part of God's answer is that "I will drive the northern horde far from you" (2:20). A change of heart in terms of ecological priorities can mean that industrial-scale ecological destruction will no longer be accepted as the price of progress.

Apart from the removal of the "northern horde", all of the other blessings in this section are indirect blessings which the people receive through ecological restoration. Blessings include grain, new wine and olive oil (2:19), new pastures and new fruit on fig trees and vines (2:22), autumn rains and spring rains (2:23), overflowing grain, wine and oil (2:24), and plenty to eat (2:26). These blessings of restoration reflect exactly those things that were taken from the people in chapter 1 through the locust plague and drought.

God's answer concludes with "then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God" (2:27). In other words, restoration of right relationship with God is signified by the abundance of creation around us – not with blessings such as riches or military victory. The role of creation as a barometer of the state of our relationship with God is clear.

### THE DAY OF THE LORD (2:28-32)

The next section (2:28-32) describes the positive aspects of the Day of the LORD within restored Earth Community, when God will "pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions" (2:28). A change in heart towards ecological relationships will result in a changed desire for action. In this case, the action is to prophesy, i.e., to speak out against an unsustainable future of continued ecological damage, and to dream of a future with a restored relationship with creation.

The "great and dreadful Day of the LORD" will still happen, in other words earthly life will still be impacted by the ecological damage that has been accumulating over the past century. However, in restored Earth community, future damage can be reduced, and Earth Community repaired.

### GOD'S JUDGEMENT OF THE NATIONS (3:1-16)

This section describes God's judgement on the nations "for what they did to my inheritance, my people Israel" (3:2). The literal content of this section is linked strongly to the history of the divided kingdom, and the invasions by Assyria and/or Babylon. To appropriate this section to the current ecological crisis requires a substantial, imaginative generalisation of the content.

The first step in such an appropriation is the identification of the characters in the original setting with modern day equivalents in today's ecological crisis. The most obvious mapping is to identify "my people Israel" with God's people today. However, in the context that "my people Israel" are those who have been sinned against and devastated by the nations, a more useful correspondence would be to identify both human and non-human members of restored Earth Community with the original "my people Israel." The statement that "the LORD is a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel" (3:16) suggests that Israel best represents those in right relationship with God.

The other group, the nations, represents those who are not in right relationship with God and creation. Through their actions, they have ravaged creation, and left their land unsustainable. The images are of destruction – "swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes for the winepress is full and the vats overflow – so great is their wickedness" (3:13). Destruction of the environment removes access to sufficient food and water, and the resulting global tensions may be precursors to modern wars over access to scarce resources.

Overall, ecological appropriation of this section reflects the continuing theme of the Day of the LORD as a time when God's judgement regarding the consequences of ecological mismanagement will become clear. Those who return to right relationship with God find refuge, and those who continue to despoil creation will suffer the consequences.

### RESTORATION (3:17-21)

The final section confirms the benefits and blessings of restored Earth Community. The enormity of the modern ecological crisis can seem overwhelming and continued degradation of all creation can seem inevitable. However this passage provides a clear message of hope. Even if there are people and nations who continue to despoil creation, and even if the consequences of these actions are wars and destruction, God clearly promises blessings and refuge to those who turn back to God, and who seek to live in restored Earth Community. Images such as "the mountains will drip new wine and the hills will flow with milk" (3:18) signify that God's blessings are generous and abundant. Living in restored Earth Community does not mean that life needs to be frugal. Instead, care for the environment brings fullness of blessings, and the abundance of these blessings indicates restored and right relationships.

For city dwellers in the industrialised west, living perhaps with little direct interaction with the natural environment, restoration of Earth Community is also a call to reconnect with that environment in a hands-on way. Care for the earth becomes a personal, as well as a corporate responsibility.

## CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of Joel has yielded some valuable, new insights into a theological response to the modern ecological crisis. The exegetical techniques used are not all that different from conventional exegesis, and they remain what Horrell describes as “coherent ... with a scripturally shaped Christian orthodoxy.”<sup>45</sup> The difference is that the text has been explicitly interpreted as to how it can provide answers to the problems of today’s ecological crisis. This interpretation brings the following insights.

- (1) Humanity is called first to observe the state of creation, and acknowledge that there is an ecological crisis.
- (2) The damaged state of creation is a reflection of the state of humanity’s broken covenant relationships within Earth Community.
- (3) Having observed a damaged creation, the appropriate response is first to mourn. Mourning then leads to acknowledge of culpability for the breakdown of relationships in Earth Community, and the need for repentance and return to God.
- (4) Restoration of Earth Community is a responsibility for priests, elders, and the whole church. Action needs to be in community, not just individually. The ecological crisis is not just a political problem, it is a religious issue.
- (5) In this context, the Day of the LORD can be seen as a metaphor for when the inevitable consequences of continued ecological unsustainability come to a head. God is not a passive observer of the ecological crisis. God’s judgement (blessings of a fruitful earth or curses of a ravaged earth) depends on right relationships within Earth community.
- (6) God will provide a refuge for those who choose to live in restored Earth Community, and creation will continue to provide abundantly for them. By contrast, those who seek to unsustainably exploit creation will themselves face destruction.
- (7) Joel provides a valuable framework for a liturgical response to the environmental crisis. This response might be a formal, corporate liturgical response or a personal devotional response. The words of Joel do not simply describe an ancient crisis, they are words that can be used today to do things – to observe, to lament, to repent and to be restored.

Overall, the prophetic call of Joel appropriated into the modern ecological crisis is for a change of heart in humanity’s attitude to creation. While the Bible promises unmerited and unearned spiritual eschatological salvation for God’s people, a full and abundant earthly life will depend on restoration of right relationships within Earth Community through a return to God.

Methodologically, the technique of appropriating a text about an ancient ecological crisis to the modern ecological crisis brings fresh insights and new messages. Although some historically grounded passages need substantial imaginative reflection to yield modern meaning in the context of ecological action, it is possible to draw out some key messages which are repeated throughout the book. At least in the case of the book of Joel,

---

<sup>45</sup> David G. Horrell, “Introduction,” in *Ecological Hermeneutics*, 8-9.



the technique of ecological appropriation reinforces the practical, modern value of ancient texts as an underutilised resource for addressing today's ecological crisis.

---

**Author:** Neil Bergmann recently completed an MA(Theology) at Australian Catholic University, Brisbane. His interests are in eco-theology and hermeneutics. He is Chair of the Council for Ministry and Mission, Lutheran Church of Australia, Queensland District. Separately from his theological studies, he lectures and undertakes research in computer engineering at University of Queensland, Brisbane  
Email: [n.bergmann@itee.uq.edu.au](mailto:n.bergmann@itee.uq.edu.au)

---

© Neil Bergmann 2013