

ECOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE JONAH NARRATIVE – HAVE THEY SUCCEEDED IN OVERCOMING ANTHROPOCENTRISM?

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ABSTRACT

A central concern of ecological biblical hermeneutics is to overcome the anthropocentric bias we are likely to find both in interpretations of the biblical texts and in the biblical text itself. One of the consequences of anthropocentrism has been described as a sense of distance, separation, and otherness in the relationship between humans and other members of the Earth community. This article is an attempt to determine whether extant ecological interpretations of the Jonah narrative have successfully addressed this sense of estrangement. The article focuses on the work of Ernst M. Conradie (2005), Raymond F. Person (2008), Yael Shemesh (2010), Brent A. Strawn (2012), and Phyllis Trible (1994, 1996).

INTRODUCTION

A growing number of biblical scholars have been inspired and guided by the groundbreaking work of Norman Habel and the Earth Bible Team since roughly 2000, as well as their contributions at consultations on ecological hermeneutics at meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature. These projects have been informed by a particular hermeneutical framework,¹ described as a hermeneutic of suspicion, identification,

¹ In the rapidly growing field of ecological interpretations of the Bible at least three approaches are operative. The first approach attempts to show how the Bible contains a positive message of environmental care by rescuing “difficult” texts from the charge that they legitimize the unsustainable exploitation of the earth, and showing the ecological potential of texts whose ecological relevance has generally been missed. This approach is

and retrieval.²

A central concern of this threefold ecological hermeneutic is to overcome the anthropocentric bias that we are likely to find both in ourselves as readers and in the text we are reading. Habel (2008:4) describes “anthropocentrism” as

the assumption or condition we have inherited as human beings – especially in the Western world – that we are beings of a totally different order than all other creatures in nature ... A second face of this anthropocentric bias relates to nature as ‘object’ [which has] contributed to a sense of distance, separation, and otherness.

This paper is an attempt to determine whether the application of (elements of) a hermeneutic of suspicion, identification, and retrieval has succeeded in addressing the sense of distance, separation, and otherness, which is a consequence of anthropocentrism.

In order to overcome this bias, one has to agree with Habel’s very helpful definition of the term “Earth”. He says,

The term Earth refers to the total ecosystem, that is, 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 (Habel 2008:3).

However, does Habel’s explanation of an ecological hermeneutics of suspicion, identification and retrieval really do justice to this understanding of the term “Earth”?

represented particularly in some evangelical writing. The second approach, developed by the Earth Bible team since 2000, and at a series of consultations on ecological hermeneutics held at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature since 2004, attempts to confront the naïve use of the Bible in works of ecotheology through a critical ecojustice hermeneutic, which is characterised by suspicion concerning the anthropocentrism of the biblical writers as well as their later interpreters, and a corresponding attempt to recover the voice of Earth. A third approach, associated with a project at the University of Exeter on “Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics”, has developed a position somewhere between the stances of the first and second approaches. They broadly describe their approach as “an attempt to construct an ecological theology which, while innovative, is nonetheless coherent (and in dialogue) with a scripturally shaped Christian orthodoxy ... sufficiently faithful to the tradition to be authentically Christian yet sufficiently creative to reshape a tradition that has by and large been preoccupied with issues of human behaviour and salvation” (Horrell et al. 2010:8-9). See also Horrell (2010:11-19).

² Within this framework a set of six ecojustice principles have been applied, namely the principles of intrinsic worth, interconnectedness, voice, purpose, mutual custodianship, and resistance (Habel & Trudinger 2008:2).

Does it perhaps spend so much energy on putting oppressed elements of Earth on centre stage that, paradoxically, the sense of distance, separation, and otherness remains?

This article begins with a very brief overview of the three elements of a hermeneutic of suspicion, identification and retrieval.

AN ECOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION, IDENTIFICATION, AND RETRIEVAL

Norman Habel's explanation of this threefold ecological hermeneutics can be summarised as follows (cf. Habel 2008:4-5):

Suspicion: This facet of the proposed hermeneutic requires that "we begin reading with the suspicion that the text is likely to be inherently anthropocentric and/or has traditionally been read from an anthropocentric perspective"³ (Habel 2008:4). Reading with this suspicion corresponds with an appreciation of the intrinsic worth also of non-human parts of nature. Often they are viewed merely as the stage or background for God's dealings with humanity, rather than as valued subjects in their own right.

Identification: Habel (2008:4) uses the terms identification, empathy, and solidarity more or less interchangeably. He notes that as human beings we identify – often unconsciously – with the human characters in biblical narratives, whether it is an empathetic or antipathetic identification. Identifying with Earth requires that, before we begin reading, we face the prior ecological reality of our kinship with Earth. "Identification with Earth and members of the Earth community raises our consciousness to the injustices against Earth as they are portrayed in the text, both at the hands of humans and God" (Habel 2008:5). This element of an ecological hermeneutics requires that Bible readers take up the cause of the natural world, seeking to expose the wrongs Earth has suffered, and to discern, where possible, the way Earth has resisted these wrongs.

Retrieval: This element of ecological hermeneutics attempts to recover the voice of Earth where this voice is silenced or opposed by the explicit perspective of the text. It also looks for surprises in the text about the nonhuman characters in a narrative. In addition, Earth or members of the earth community may play a key role or be highly valued in the narrative, but our anthropocentric bias has prevented us from noticing

³ See Habel's explanation of anthropocentrism above.

and valuing the role they play. We often regard such texts as mere scenery, poetic license, or symbolic language (Habel 2008:5). Discerning this voice may even take the form of reconstructing the narrative. Earth must be allowed to also become an interpreter of the text (Habel 2008:5).

Common to all three facets of a hermeneutic of suspicion, identification and retrieval are the ideas of exposing anthropocentrism, and focusing on the non-human parts of nature or Earth. A question that presents itself is whether a deliberate focus on the non-human parts of nature is the most fruitful way of overcoming the anthropocentric bias and a sense of distance, separation, and otherness to which anthropocentrism has contributed. This question serves as our guide in the next section of my paper that deals with extant ecological interpretations of the book of Jonah.

ATTEMPTS AT OVERCOMING ANTHROPOCENTRISM: ECOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

To my surprise, only a handful of scholars have attempted ecological interpretations of Jonah.⁴ The Jonah narrative has not been one of the favourite texts in studies that attempted to uncover ecological wisdom in the Bible.⁵ I regard four of these studies as representative of this limited body of literature. Two focus on the nonhuman parts of nature, the third concerns itself with a particular motif in the narrative, and the fourth discusses ecology as a theme in the theology of the book of Jonah.

Focusing on the role of non-human characters in the narrative (Person and Shemesh)

Two scholars studied the role played by non-human characters in the Jonah narrative.

⁴ These scholars made deliberate attempts to relate their interpretation of the Jonah narrative (or elements of the text) to the present-day ecological crisis. I do not regard the work of scholars who focussed on elements of nature in the Jonah narrative, but who have not related their findings to current ecological concerns as ecological interpretations of the book. I have also excluded studies that contain only incidental comments on the possible ecological implications of an element of their reading of the Jonah text.

⁵ Ernst Conradie (2010:295) says such studies have typically focused on favourite texts such as Genesis 1-2; the theme of the covenant (e.g. Genesis. 6-9); the Sabbatical laws (e.g. Leviticus 25); Job 37-39); some of the Psalms (8, 19, 24, 98, 104); some prophetic texts such as Isaiah 9-11, 40, 65, Ezekiel 36, Joel, Amos (8, 19, 24, 98, 104); some of the sayings of Jesus (e.g. in Matthew 6:28-30, 10:29-31); Romans 8:18-23, Colossians 1; and Revelations 21-22.

Raymond F. Person Jr's (2008) study, titled "The role of nonhuman characters in Jonah" was published in the volume that contains papers delivered at consultations on ecological hermeneutics held at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. His study, obviously, was informed by a hermeneutic of suspicion, identification and retrieval. In 2010 Yael Shemesh published an article titled "'And many beasts' (Jonah 4:11): The function and status of animals in the book of Jonah" in the *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*. Although she has not been closely associated with the Earth Bible team, or with the SBL consultations on ecological hermeneutics, her study also aims at addressing the issue of anthropocentrism.

Both scholars attempted to show that these non-human characters are controlled/appointed by Yahweh and obedient to the deity, on the one hand, but they are also portrayed as active participants in the narrative, on the other.

Person (2008:86), for example, notes that once Yahweh has sent the storm, it appears to take on a life of its own, at least as an active participant in the narrative, which is evident in the way the sea is referred to thereafter. In 1:11 the sea seems to have a will of its own: "And they [the sailors] said to him: 'What must we do to you for the sea to calm down for us?' For the sea was becoming increasingly violent." The narrative reports as follows about the consequences of Jonah being thrown overboard: "...and the sea ceased its raging" (1:15). With the storm raging, "the ship threatened/thought (שָׁבַח) to break up" (1:4).

Person (2008:86-87) also refers to the great fish that responds to a verbal command of Yahweh (2:11): "Then the Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah upon dry land". Yahweh also appoints a plant (4:6), a worm (4:7) and a fierce east wind (4:8) for certain purposes. They seem to understand their role and they obediently respond. According to Person (2008:87):

These nonhuman characters are understood as active, independent agents who obediently respond to the Lord. As the Creator of 'the sea and dry land' (Jonah 1:9), the Lord is portrayed as controlling all of creation, but this does not require an understanding of these nonhuman characters as mere puppets of the Lord. As active agents, it is possible that they, like Jonah, may disobey the Lord ... Jonah's initial disobedience is contrasted with the obedience of the nonhuman characters, the pagan sailors, and the pagan Ninevites.

According to Person (2008:87) the final words of the narrative confirm that nonhuman

entities are considered active agents with value: In 4:11 Yahweh says: “Yet I should not have compassion on Nineveh, that large city, which has in it more than one hundred and twenty thousand people, who do not know their right hand from their left hand, and many cattle as well?”

Shemesh (2010) takes Jonah 4:11 as point of departure and reflects on the function and status of animals in the narrative. She also argues “that the very last words of the narrative – ‘and many beasts’ – indicate that divine mercy transcends human beings and includes animals as well” (Shemesh 2010:3). She highlights three elements of the function and status of animals in the narrative:

First, animals are obedient agents of God (Shemesh 2010:8-17). She contrasts the obedience of the fish with the lack of obedience of Jonah. However, she argues, there is more to the fish serving as the agent of God:

(a) The fish may be associated with the name of the city of Nineveh. Scholars have noted that in cuneiform “Nineveh” is written as a fish inside an enclosure. If this link between the name of the city and the fish holds water, the narrative suggests that Yahweh sees to it that Jonah, who wants to get away from “Fish City”, winds up in a fish all the same.

(b) The author’s use of a fish as the divine agent emphasises Yahweh’s control of the world. From the earliest times the sea and monsters have fascinated and terrified people, because they are unpredictable, ungovernable. Yahweh appointing a great fish suggests that Yahweh is control, also of the sea and its fearsome inhabitants. Yahweh created them all (1:9).

(c) The portrayal of the fish as an agent of God fits in with the depiction of animals as agents of God in the Hebrew Bible in general, where they are miraculous signs, or serve a didactic purpose, or serve as a means of punishment or salvation/deliverance (Shemesh 2010:5-8).

Secondly, animals are members of a community who are partners in repenting and possibly in shouting to God (Shemesh 2010:17-20). When the king of Nineveh hears the words spoken by the prophet Jonah, he makes a royal proclamation that applies to both humans and animals (3:7-8): “No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God.” Shemesh notes that this description is extraordinary for the Hebrew Bible, but in the context of the narrative as a whole, this royal proclamation is not so astonishing, given the

special status of animals in this narrative, ranging from the large fish to the tiny worm that act in the service of Yahweh, and concluding with the divine compassion that extends to “many animals” as well. The phrase “human beings and animals” appears twice in the king’s proclamation. The animals are clearly included in the fasting and wearing of sackcloth (3:7-8a). Shemesh can imagine that the animals too are meant to cry mightily to God (3:8b), because they are being denied food. When denied grazing and fodder, cattle and sheep would certainly low and bleat in distress. Shemesh refers to a number of biblical texts that refer to animals that call on God to provide their wants, for example Joel 1:20; Ps 104:21, 27; Ps 147:9; Job 38:41.

Shemesh (2010:19-20) begs to differ from scholars who have read the king’s proclamation as satirical, ironic, or humoristic and as evidence that the penance of the Ninevites was superficial. She concludes that the book of Jonah describes the common destiny of human beings and animals. She finds support in the story of the flood (Gn 6-9), and in the book of Joel where both human beings and animals cry out to Yahweh for deliverance when they are victimized by the locusts that have descended on the land (Joel 1:18–20).

Thirdly, Yahweh has compassion for animals (Shemesh 2010:20-25). Shemesh contends that a theological issue, namely the tension between justice and mercy, informs the portrayal of animals in the Jonah narrative:

Jonah believes that sinners must be punished and expects the Lord to govern the world with strict impartiality, following the principle of justice and not the principle of mercy. Unlike Moses, who urged God, ‘Turn from Thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against Thy people’ (Exodus 32:12), and unlike Joel, with his message of encouragement and promise, ‘for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil’ (Joel 2:13), Jonah assails the Lord with the reason for his flight from his mission in the past and his disgust with the life in the present: ‘for I knew that Thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repenting of evil’ (Jonah 4:2) (Shemesh 2010:21-22).

Shemesh (2010:23) notes that the conclusion of the narrative shows that the Lord’s compassion extends to both humans and animals. In fact, Yahweh’s compassion for animals is emphasised by the structure of God’s rebuke of the prophet, which highlights the words “and many beasts” by leaving this phrase without a parallel

clause [her translation]:

And the Lord said,	
You pity the plant	And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city,
For which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow,	In which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons
Which came into being in a night, and perished in a night.	Who do not know their right hand from their left,
	And many beasts?

The Lord's concern for the well-being of animals too, she says, means that they do not exist solely to be exploited by human beings. Their lives have intrinsic worth, independent of human beings. She finds support for this view in the book of Job, where Yahweh, speaks about various species of animals for which He provides, and what is common to them all is that human beings derive no benefit from them, because they cannot dominate them and subdue them to their own needs (Job 39:5-12; 40:15-32 [40:15-41:8]).

Shemesh (2010:25) is quick to add that despite the Hebrew Bible's emphasis on the intrinsic worth of animals, independent of human beings, it links the fate of animals to that of human beings.

When God sent the flood to destroy the world, the animals perished with the human beings (Gen 7:21-23). Had the Lord carried through with his decree and wiped out Nineveh, the animals (as well as the innocent children and infants) would have been destroyed too. This linkage imposes special responsibility on human beings, because their behavior affects the entire world. But it also imposes special responsibility on God, who governs the world, since punishing certain human beings for their transgressions will inevitably harm the innocent as well, both human beings (such as children) and animals. This is how we should understand the Lord's rhetorical question at the end of the book: 'And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and many beasts?' (Jonah 4:11).

Both Person and Shemesh point out that an anthropocentric bias has informed many interpretations of the Jonah narrative. Person (2008:88) notes that it has not even occurred to most interpreters to represent nonhuman characters in the story as active agents. He says the role of these characters is generally limited to God's use of these characters to advance the plot, and their characterisation as an element of the satirical tone of the narrative (cf. Person 2008:88).

With reference to the very last words of the narrative – “and many beasts” – Shemesh (2010:3) observes that the idea of divine mercy transcending human beings and including animals as well, is indigestible to an anthropocentric worldview. She gives two examples: (a) that of interpreters who understood this phrase to mean the human inhabitants of Nineveh, or the evildoers among its citizens; (b) Miles, who understands this verse as a witticism of Yahweh – the foolishness of Jonah is compared with the foolishness of the Ninevites in their repentance, dressing their animals in sackcloth and forcing them to fast.

To summarise the contributions of Person and Shemesh: Both focus on the animals in the narrative. Both show a keen awareness of the impact of anthropocentrism on interpretations of Jonah. Both find no signs of anthropocentrism in the text itself. However, there is one important difference between the two studies: Shemesh highlights the partnership between animals and humans in repenting and possibly shouting to God, as well as in being recipients of the mercy of the deity. Person, on the other hand, highlights the fact that God values the nonhuman characters as active agents in the divine plan for creation.

In my view, this crucial difference between the two studies concerns precisely the issue under investigation. The study of Shemesh shows an openness to elements of the text that invite us, the readers, to imagine a life in partnership with the rest of nature – a partnership that may reduce a sense of distance, separation, and otherness, which would be an important step towards overcoming an anthropocentric bias.

Reflecting on a motif in Jonah: Vomiting (Strawn)

In a study titled *On vomiting: Leviticus, Jonah, Ea(a)rth*, Brent A. Strawn (2012) focuses on the use of the Hebrew word נִקָּה (to vomit) in these two biblical books. He argues that the instances of נִקָּה in Jonah and Leviticus seem particularly relevant to our contemporary circumstances for a number of reasons:

The most important of which concern issues surrounding sustainability

and the environment, if for no other reason than the fact that the subject of נִקָּה is often not humans ... but the ground/land/earth or its creatures (Strawn 2012:447).

Strawn (2012:447) is concerned to show that the theological nature of (biblical) vomiting impinges on the present-day ecological crisis by (a) underscoring its severity and its relationship to God's judgment (Leviticus), and (b) by motivating us to do something about it for purposes of God's mission (Jonah).

In the Jonah narrative the key text is 2:10 (Hebrew 2:11): "Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out onto dry land" [Strawn's translation]. Strawn (2012:452) notes that this vomiting is in direct response to the divine command, and that this command comes immediately after Jonah finishes praying his psalm of thanksgiving from the bowels of this fish. He points out that Yahweh's address to the fish may be an answer to Jonah's prayer, but ironically, that answer takes the form of fish vomit, as if Jonah made the fish sick because he was something intolerably indigestible (Strawn 2012:453; see also Wolff 1986:139; Sauter 2003:146-147). Jonah's psalm of thanksgiving which gives expression to false piety, ill fits the narrative context – thereby making the fish ill (Strawn 2012:453).

Strawn (2012:453) considers another interesting angle: The verb form used in this verse could be parsed as *qal* or *hiph'il*. If it is *qal*, the fish vomits of its own volition, but if it is *hiph'il*, the text would be saying that the fish does so under God's guidance. The verse would thus be translated: "Then the Lord spoke to the fish, causing Jonah to be vomited out onto dry land" [Strawn's translation]. In this view, it is not the fish, but Yahweh who is sick of Jonah and his prayer – or perhaps both.

Strawn (2012:454) makes an additional observation: The vomiting of the fish accomplishes the purpose of preserving Jonah's life and setting him back on track. This vomiting may be due to disobedience, but it is also into rescue, new life, even new mission.

The motif of vomiting does not occur only in chapter 2, says Strawn (2012:454). Jonah 4:6 refers to the *qiqayon* plant in 4:6 (twice), 7, 9, and 10. The name of the plant may be a wordplay that would mean, or evoke, "the vomiting of Jonah". The wordplay may have evoked a syntactical construction in Hebrew that is typically used for emphasis, namely the infinite absolute of a verb followed by a finite form of the same verb. The last item in the sequence would presumably be the subject or, in certain cases, the object of the verb.

Infinite absolute	+ Perfect	+ Subject/Object
קיא “vomiting”	קא “he/it vomited”	יונה “Jonah”

Abbreviated to the one word קיקיון this construction could be translated as: (a) “Jonah has certainly vomited” (Jonah as the subject), or (b) “He/it has certainly vomited Jonah” (Jonah as object). In view of Jonah 2, Strawn prefers the latter translation option.

The plant’s name, seen in this way, suggests that the plant and the fish (two natural phenomena) combine to make important theological points to Jonah. Together with other elements of nature they drive the plot of the narrative; they also drive its prophet! (Strawn 2012:457). Strawn (2012:458) summarises his thesis as follows:

The book of Jonah does not happen without the natural world, and Jonah’s mission to Nineveh does not happen without the natural world’s vomiting.

He (Strawn 2012:458) concludes that the hard lessons Jonah had to learn are (a) (false) piety is not enough, and (b) God’s work and will, insofar as they impinge on mercy, extend to the most unlikely subjects: plants, worms, cattle in sackcloth, even Jonah himself. In the final instance it is about the Lord’s mercy:

The vomiting out is a stroke – a curious, unlikely, and disgusting one to be sure – of God’s mercy ... Working for God for the sake of Ea(a)rth⁶ is an exercise in godly compassion. No less. (Strawn 2012:463)

Strawn’s study ends on an alarming note. He states that if Ea(a)rth is not all very good any longer (cf. Gn 1:31), the fault apparently lies with us. The heating of our oceans may be the beginning of a massive geological reflux. Jonah (that is we) cannot escape Yahweh. Is Ea(a)rth going to vomit human beings out for judgment (Leviticus), or unto mission, creating the impulse to work for change and reform so as to protect the

⁶ Strawn’s unconventional spelling of the word “Earth” was inspired by the title of Bill McKibben’s book *Eaarth: Making a life on a tough new planet* (2011). Strawn (2012:459) explains: “The spelling of ‘Eaarth’ in the title is no typographical error but quite intentional. In the book McKibben argues that the clima(c)tic changes brought about by human practices have forever changed the planet. Human beings must wake up to this reality, and one way to signal this new, changed environment is via language. We ought not call this planet ‘Earth’ any longer, but ‘Eaarth,’ because the old ‘Earth’ is no more: ‘It needs a new name.’”

planet and its creatures, including human beings (Jonah)?

Strawn's study does not address the issue of anthropocentrism directly. However, he stresses elements of human behaviour that seem justifiable from an anthropocentric viewpoint: exploitation of Earth through patterns of (over)production and (over)consumption (Strawn 2012:460). Strawn's understanding of the vomit-motif in Jonah motivated him to reflect on the "what we can do about it" question (Strawn 2012:461). He concludes that the vomiting of Earth's creatures – fish and *qiqajon* plant – amounts to vomiting unto mission and God's work. Working for God for the sake of Earth is an exercise in godly compassion. This conclusion is Strawn's answer to the question how we could overcome anthropocentrism and a sense of distance, separation, and otherness – by embracing a theology of compassion.

Showing that ecology is one of a number of prominent themes in the book (Trible)

In her commentary on the book of Jonah in the New Interpreter's Bible series, Phyllis Trible (1996) claims that ecology constitutes a prominent theme throughout the Jonah narrative. In her discussion of the theology of the book, Trible (1996:482-483) offers a retelling of the narrative that highlights the theme of ecology. Two elements of her discussion are of special importance: how the narrative portrays the relationship between God and nature, and the relationship between humans and nature:

She (Trible 1996:482) highlights the relationship between Yahweh and nature. At the beginning of the first and second episodes Yahweh acts as the subject of a verb whose object is nature. In 1:4 the deity hurls a great wind that produces a great storm upon the sea. Again, at the beginning of the next episode (1:17), Yahweh appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah (1:17). In the first scene the storm threatens the animated ship and its sailors. Countering the disobedience of one creature, Yahweh sets nature over against many. The sailors and Jonah find themselves in an extremely vulnerable situation. The sailors seek to appease the sea by first offering it inanimate wares (1:5). Then they seek to escape the storm by rowing back to dry land (1:13). At last they succeed in calming the sea by throwing Jonah into the sea (1:15).

In the second scene the great fish mediates between Yahweh and the human being, but the verbs used for its actions suggest an uneasy relationship between the fish and the human being. The verb בלע (swallow) suggests that the fish is a hostile environment for Jonah, and the verb קיא suggests that Jonah is a hostile substance for

the fish. The natural creature rejects the human creature, but it happens because Yahweh tells the fish to do so. Whether the fish performs a benign or malignant function is not clear.

Trible (1996:483) shows that the ecological theme continues in Nineveh (Chapter 3), but with some differences. Here the natural creatures are not instruments for human or divine purposes; instead, they participate with human beings in acts of repentance. The royal decree treats animals on a par with human beings. The salutation of this decree, for example, addresses the population as האדם והבהמה “the human and the animal” (3:7). The animals (הבהמה) is emphasised by the accompanying phrase והצאן והבקר “the herd and the flock”. The intent of including animals in the acts of repentance, Trible (1996:483) adds, “is not ridicule but respect, not parody but pathos.”

At the close of the narrative, again appointed by God, nature benevolent and malevolent instructs Jonah. The *qiqajon* shades him; he delights in the plant (4:6). A worm kills the plant (4:7); he pities the plant (4:10). A fierce wind blows upon him, and the sun attacks his head; he faints and asks to die (4:8). Yahweh uses these experiences to argue divine pity for Nineveh. Trible concludes her discussion on ecology as a theme in Jonah as follows:

God describes the great city as a socio-natural environment with humans by the thousands and animals galore. The deity acknowledges what the king knows: In issues of life and death the animals of Nineveh matter alongside the people. On this strong ecological note the book ends.

Based on her reading of the Jonah narrative, Trible offers a rich and nuanced perspective on the question how a sense of distance, separation, and otherness can be reduced:

(a) Imagine that elements of nature could serve as obedient instruments used by God to argue for compassion of a special kind: compassion aimed at humans and animals – a city inhabited by humans by the thousands and animals galore.

(b) At the same time, accept that an uneasy, or ambiguous, relationship between humans and the rest of nature exists: humans sometimes experience nature as a threat, but at the same time nature offers rescue and protection. The acts of swallowing and vomiting also suggest this ambiguous relationship. One cannot be sure whether the fish acts as a benevolent or malignant agent towards Jonah.

(c) When it comes to matters of life and death, elements of nature and humans are

portrayed as partners. Both participate in acts of repentance, and both are objects of divine pity/compassion.

(d) Tribble (1996:483) rightly describes the portrayal of Nineveh as a socio-natural environment. Postulating a link between the social and the animal order, the city symbolises the cultivated earth. An urban environment seeks the wellbeing of natural creatures.

Tribble's interpretation of Jonah proposes that, in the first place, we humans need to acknowledge our partnership with nature, and secondly, that our sense of distance, separation and otherness with regard to nature can only be justified from the experience of ambiguity and uneasiness associated with a position of human vulnerability and respect for the rest of nature.

Exploring the Jonah narrative in the light of ecological hermeneutics (Conradie)

In a monograph titled *Fishing for Jonah (anew): Various approaches to biblical interpretation*, Ernst Conradie (2005:219-227) wrote a section on an ecological hermeneutics. The bulk of this section consists of a general introduction to ecological hermeneutics, which focuses mostly on Genesis 1:27 (the text on human "dominion"). In a brief section at the end Conradie (2005:225-226) deals with Jonah in the light of an ecological hermeneutics. Despite the brevity of his contribution, some of his comments are extremely relevant to the issue under discussion.

Conradie (2005:226) points out that exegetes have not neglected the abundant references to that which is earthly and concrete in the narrative. However they have privileged the acts of human beings. The role of non-human creatures has often been reduced to that of merely providing the background for, or the stage on which the drama between God and human beings has played itself out. This is one way of objectifying nature, which contributes to a sense of distance, separation, and otherness.

With regard to the Jonah text itself, Conradie (2005:226) concludes: "The dominant thrust of the book of Jonah is one of inclusiveness. It counters an exclusivist preoccupation with the interests of one nation, one culture, one person, one species." In a final note Conradie (2005:226) makes a comment that is of great importance for the issue discussed in this article:

The vision is one of God's astonishing mercy that extends over the whole of creation. This mercy is perhaps epitomised in the motif of the great

fish that appeared to offer unexpected (if uncomfortable) safety and protection to Jonah in his deepest hour of need. This mercy is not manifested at a distance; it is one that enfolds Jonah like a mother's womb. It is from this nourishing and protective womb that Jonah emerged in order to meet the God of unfathomable mercy, again, in Nineveh.

Here we find exactly the opposite of a sense of distance, separation, and otherness: God's mercy is not manifested at a distance. It happens when Jonah is enfolded by the great fish, one of God's other creatures.

However, Conradie is not convinced that this inclusiveness is sustained in the narrative as a whole. He says it may be argued that the narrative use of nature-related motifs such as the big fish, the cucumber plant and the worm is largely instrumentalist. Furthermore, only domesticated animals benefit from God's mercy. The only plant that is mentioned in the text is scorched in the process of God's attempt to teach the Jonah character a lesson. A hermeneutic of suspicion has prompted Conradie to also consider these matters. However, Conradie himself admits that these observations may be overly critical. Within the space of such a short narrative not everything can be spelled out.

CAN NON-ECOLOGICAL READINGS OF BIBLICAL TEXTS CONTRIBUTE TO THIS DISCUSSION?

This article focuses primarily on deliberate ecological interpretations of Jonah, because such readings usually aim at addressing an anthropocentric bias. To judge interpretations of the book of Jonah that are not deliberate attempts to offer an ecological reading of the narrative on this issue, would not be fair. However, to distinguish between ecological and other interpretations of Jonah does not imply that studies that fall in the "other" category are irrelevant to debates in ecotheology in general and to the issue of anthropocentrism in particular. Any reading of the narrative can potentially reinforce a sense of distance, separation and otherness, or alternatively, promote a sense of the interconnectedness of all creatures in the Earth. A few randomly chosen non-ecological readings of Jonah 3:7-8 (the section on the animals fasting together with the Ninevites) illustrate the point:

In some of these studies the interconnectedness between humans and animals in

this passage is highlighted. When deliberate attempts at ecological interpretations of the Bible were still quite uncommon, Hans Walter Wolff (1978:49) stated:

Behind this stands the certainty, seen ever more clearly by us today, that the decisions made by mankind, whether they be for evil or for good, also draw mute creatures into ensuing disaster or salvation... Consider! Modern behavioural research in biology was not the first to speak of symbiosis... This community binds humankind together with the rest of creation. All of life on earth is knit together into a 'community of common fate'...

A year earlier, in his commentary on Obadiah and Jonah in the *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament* series, Wolff pointed out that the idea of the absorbance of animals into the lot of humans, and vice versa, is found elsewhere in the Old Testament in texts such as Judith 4:10; Joel 1:18-20; Ecclesiastes 3:18-21; Exodus 21:28 and Job 38:41. James Limburg (1993:82-83) contends that Jonah 3:7-8 "is one of many biblical illustrations of the solidarity between humans and animals". He makes references in this regard to Joel 1:18, 20; Joel 2:21-22; Jeremia 27:6; Judith 4:9-10; Psalm 147:9; Job 38:41; Luke 12:24; Psalm 104:27-30; Psalm 145:15-16, and of course Jonah 4:11. Robert B. Salters (1994:20) says the decree of the king of Nineve also reminds him of the commandment in Exodus 20:10 that stipulates that nobody, not even one's livestock, may work on the Sabbath; the cattle looking up to God in Joel 1:20; and the linking of humans and animals in Jeremiah 7:20. These three authors have demonstrated that the surprising interweaving of the actions of humans and animals in this section of the Jonah narrative may not be so strange at all. Many biblical passages echo this sentiment.

Thomas M. Bolin (1997:128), following Phyllis L. Tribble (1963:90-91) and Jack M. Sasson (1990:254-255), argues that

rather than attempting to paint a silly scene in the mass repentance of all the Ninevites, the author has constructed a tightly structured decree that focuses in turn on people, animals, and then both.

Bolin (1997:128) summarises this neat structure as follows:

People

Not to eat (verb specific to humans, wordplay between *אל יטעמו* and *מטעם*)

Animals

Not to feed (verb specific to animals, wordplay between אל ירעו and רעה)

Both

Not to drink.

The idea of the interconnectedness of humans and animals is supported here not only by the content, but also by a series of interconnections on the morphological and syntactical levels.

André and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque (1990:129-130) argue that the point of this passage is that the animals, along with the Ninevites, pass from

a, so to speak, ‘nonkosher’ state to a ‘kosher’ one, all that belongs to them also passes into the realm of redemption. It is, one could say, the reverse of the *herem* (‘the ban’) in the Bible, whereby people and their possessions, including animals and plantations, were smitten. In other words, in the process of human repentance, the whole of nature is also transfigured. In the image of Isaiah 11:6ff, it could be said that we have here a taste of paradise!

On the other hand, some non-ecological readings of the Jonah narrative may have reinforced a sense of distance, separation and otherness. This may happen in a variety of ways:

John H. Walton (1992:52-53, 55) contends that the repentance of the Ninevites was shallow, naive, insufficient, and Assyrian-style (due to the involvement of animals in rituals of penitence). Walton therefore concludes that, after their “conversion” the Ninevites were still just as pagan and wicked – as Jonah suspects. Despite all this, God has responded with grace. The close ties between humans and animals are here seen in a negative light.

Another interesting interpretation of this passage is offered by Ferdinand Deist (1981:47-48). He views the decree of the king as an expression of radical humility. The king is willing to be counted among the sheep and cattle. Exactly this behaviour of the king prompts David Gunn (2003:700) to regard the king’s behaviour as absurd. Do both these views not take for granted, and actually reinforce a sense of distance, separation and otherness? For the king’s behaviour to be regarded as radical humility, or as absurd, a sense of otherness in the relationship between the king and the animals has to be assumed.

One way of contributing to the perceived gap between humans and other creatures, is to claim that the passage that portrays humans wearing sackcloth together with

animals (Jonah 3:6-9) as a later addition to the original narrative that did not share this sentiment (cf. E. G. Kraeling 1971:310). This view has not found much support in Jonah studies.

In *The Green Bible* (Richardson & Roff 2008) passages that demonstrate the following have been printed in green: (a) how God and Jesus interact with, care for, and are intimately involved with all of creation, (b) how all the elements of creation – land, water, air, plants, animals, humans – are interdependent, (c) how nature responds to God, and (d) how we are called to care for creation (Richardson & Roff 2008:1-16). To my surprise neither Jonah 3:6-9, nor Jonah 4:11 where Nineveh's people and animals jointly perform rituals of penitence, and share in the mercy of God, have been printed in green, despite principle (b) above, which focuses on the interdependence of all the elements of creation (Richardson & Roff 2008:905-906). The only Jonah passages printed in green are 1:4, 1:9, 1:17-2:1, and 2:10. The four passages are about God controlling nature, or humans expressing their faith in God. Never are humans and other elements of nature mentioned together in a verse printed in green. This practice surely reinforces a sense of distance, separation, and otherness.

CONCLUSION: ADDRESSING A SENSE OF DISTANCE, SEPARATION AND OTHERNESS

The studies of Person (2008) and Conradie (2005) share a common hermeneutical key provided by a hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval. The work of Person (2008) and Shemesh (2010) share a focus on the nonhuman characters in the Jonah narrative. The studies of Tribble (1996) and Conradie (2005) have a broader focus, in contrast to Strawn's interpretation of the book which focuses narrowly on the term "to vomit". Generally, all five scholars share the objective of addressing an anthropocentric bias.

Let us return to the question that has guided this study: Have extant ecological interpretations of the Jonah narrative succeeded in addressing, for readers of the biblical text, a sense of distance, separation, and otherness with regard to the relationship between humans and the rest of nature? It seems the application of a particular hermeneutical framework as such cannot serve as guarantee that one's interpretation of a text will not reinforce this threefold sense of estrangement. The focus of one's study may play a role in this regard.

Person, ironically, may have entrenched this sense of estrangement by highlighting

only nonhuman characters, and by introducing the voice of humans only when they feel or speak on behalf of nature, which may be yet another form of anthropocentrism. However, Shemesh, who also focused on the nonhuman characters in the narrative, assumed that the role of these characters in the narrative cannot be understood in isolation of their relationship to humans.

The focus of Conradie's study, which like Person's contribution, was informed by a hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval, has allowed him to also consider matters concerning the relationship between humans and the rest of creation, and to arrive at the conclusion that the narrative counters sure signs of a sense of distance, separation, and otherness, such as a preoccupation with one nation, one culture, one person, and notably, one species. The study of Phyllis Tribble, which was discussed last of the five attempts at an ecological reading of Jonah, was actually done first – some years before the inception of the Earth Bible project. Her engagement with the Jonah text, untouched by the proposed hermeneutic of suspicion, identification and retrieval, offers Bible readers material that enables them to imagine ways of bridging the perceived gap between humans and the rest of nature.

The focus of Strawn's study is very narrow: a particular motif found twice in the narrative. However, the outcome of his exploration of this motif in the context of the book as a whole, plus another text from the Hebrew Bible, allowed him to frame the issue as a relationship matter with consequences. Hence, Strawn's conclusion about the centrality of the natural world's experience of the conduct of the Jonah character, resulting in the world's vomiting. This motif reminds one of Conradie's description of the vision of God's mercy epitomised in the motif of the great fish that appeared to offer safety and protection – not at a distance. Strawn's conclusion is remarkably similar: The vomiting of the fish and of the plant may be expressions of God's mercy, or God's judgement.

I have been intrigued by an observation made by a Mexican conservation photographer, Christina Mittermeier (see Murray 2013). She believes that you need to make inspiring pictures that are beautiful to look at, but at the same time hard-hitting. She fills images with people – including families who have been affected by the destruction of the natural ecosystems on which they rely for a livelihood. So, she says, it's important to put a human face to some of these conservation issues. If we would heed her advice, we would enable Bible readers to picture themselves somewhere in the ecological interpretations we offer of these texts. As Tribble (1996:525) says, “In

the Jonah narrative, an ecology of pity becomes the paradigm for a theology of pity, and that pity embraces humans and animals.”

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