

DEALING WITH THE HISTORY-NATURE DUALISM IN ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY

Willie van Heerden

Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies

University of South Africa

P. O. Box 392

Unisa 0003

South Africa

E-mail: vheersw@unisa.ac.za

(Received 19/03/2014; Accepted 18/11/2014)

ABSTRACT

Christian theologians have been accused of contributing to humanity's alienation from nature, because they have drawn a sharp distinction between history and nature (also between humanity and nature, and God and nature). This study first offers a brief overview of studies that shed light on problems related to the history-nature dichotomy in Christian theology, and then focuses on two sets of proposed solutions to these problems: downplaying history in favour of nature, and embracing non-idealistic and non-dualistic models of the relation between history and nature. The twofold thesis of this paper is, first, that downplaying history in favour of nature may not be the most fruitful way of solving problems related to the history-nature dichotomy. This thesis is supported by literature on problem formation and problem resolution. Secondly, it argues that studies on the role of history and narrative in the formation of environmental values, and the interconnections between the histories of humans and their environments, offer useful alternatives to dualistic views of the relation between humans and the rest of the earth community. Based on these insights, the paper then offers a reading of Genesis 1:1-2:4a, which contains the biblical passage quoted most often by those who have accused Christianity of being biased against the earth and the earth community, namely Genesis 1:26-28.

INTRODUCTION

Christianity has been accused of downgrading nature by emphasising (salvation) history due to the sharp distinctions that are often drawn between history and nature, humanity and nature, God and nature, and so forth. The first part of this study gives an overview of studies that have shed light on this issue, either by exploring the history-nature dichotomy, or by offering solutions to problems related to the history-nature

dichotomy. In the second part I will argue that downplaying history in favour of nature may not be the most fruitful way of solving the problems that have resulted from an emphasis on history at the expense of nature. I hope to show that this thesis finds support (a) in literature on problem formation and problem resolution, and (b) in studies on the role of history and narrative in the formation of environmental values. Based on these insights into the interconnections between the histories of people and of their environments, the final section of this article explores elements of the Priestly creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:4a that exemplify the strong links between the history of a community and their story of the cosmos. This creation account contains the biblical passage quoted most often by those who have accused Christianity of being biased against the earth and the earth community (1:26-28).

HISTORY VERSUS NATURE: A PROBLEMATIC DICHOTOMY

From many sides Christianity has been accused of contributing to humanity's alienation from nature, or the rest of the earth community. One of these charges is that Christianity has downgraded nature by its emphasis on (salvation) history and its assertion that God had revealed God self to Israel through historical processes and traditions rather than through nature. Several prominent Old Testament scholars were on the receiving end of such criticism, for example Julius Wellhausen, George Ernest Wright and Gerhard von Rad (cf. Loader 1987:9; Simkins 1994:5-8; Hiebert 1996; Rogerson 2010:21). (For lists of charges against Christianity, see Santmire 2000:16-17, and Conradie 2005:26).

The sharp distinction between history and nature in Western (theological) thought, and its implications for ecological theology, has been well documented. Hiebert (1996:23-25) contends that most past scholarship on the place of the natural world in biblical thought has been informed by a number of questionable controlling ideas. The first and foremost of these ideas, he says, is the notion that biblical religion is concerned about history, not about nature (Hiebert 1996:23). According to this view ancient religious thought could be characterised in terms of

a rather sharp dichotomy between redemption and creation, between the realm of human culture and history on the one side and the world of nonhuman nature on the other. Whereas Israel's neighbors associated God with nature, Israel saw God and God's activity in historical experience. By consequence, the world of nature was pushed into the background in biblical faith, where it was not only marginalized but to some extent also vilified because of its association with the ancient paganism Israel had rejected.

The other controlling idea Hiebert (1996:24) refers to is the sharp distinction between desert and town. This distinction implies the history-nature polarity. Hiebert (1996:24) argues that this way of characterising the ancient Near Eastern landscape assumes that

its cultures could be related to one or the other of these environments, with the nomadic shepherds on one side and the sedentary farmers on the other. Israel, according to his view, was born in the desert, and preserved this perspective in its culture and thought even after settling down and adopting the life style of Canaanite farmers. It was a perspective, so the argument goes, arising out of nomadic movement not out of rootedness in the land, a perspective that connected the deity with people not with places, a perspective that, in a word, gave birth to a religion of people and their movements, *that is, of history not of nature* [emphasis added].

Hiebert (1996:25) points out that the view that Israelite religion was historical rather than natural is indebted in many respects to German idealistic philosophy, exemplified most clearly in the writings of G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel divided the world into two metaphysically distinct orders, namely mind and matter – the spiritual and the material. He says the world's religions had developed from religions that first identified the spiritual with the material, and later distinguished the spiritual from the material or from nature.

According to Hiebert (1996:25-26) Julius Wellhausen's distinction between historical and natural religions, as well as his view that Israelite religion had evolved

into a religion of history that signified an absolute negation of nature have been informed by Hegelian thought (cf. also Wellhausen 1957:102-104, 437-438). The same applies to G. Ernest Wright (1952:42) who quoted Hegel in support of his view that Israel decisively distanced itself from the nature religions of antiquity, as well as Gerhard von Rad. In an essay on “The theological problem of the Old Testament doctrine of creation”, von Rad (1984:142 – originally published in 1936) argued that Yahwistic faith absorbed some elements of a doctrine of creation which was known in Canaan in the pre-Israelite period, “but because of the exclusive commitment of Israel’s faith to historical salvation, the doctrine of creation was never able to attain to independent existence in its own right”. Von Rad argued that the Israelite creation idea had never itself been important to ancient Israel. God’s activity in nature (for example God creating nature, God working through the processes of nature, and God appearing in nature) was understood to have historical purposes (cf. Simkin 1994:7). The idea of creation had been incorporated into the idea of salvation. This incorporation has the same result as the separation between the two, argues von Rad (cf. Loader 1987:9). Nature can be discarded. Scholars such as von Rad thus unwittingly gave credibility to Lynn White’s accusations thirty years later when he claimed that there is a huge burden of guilt for Christianity to bear because of its arrogance towards nature (cf. White 1967). Simkins (1994:7) points out that the result of von Rad’s study has been the further polarisation of history and nature in biblical interpretation. If Israel’s faith is primarily concerned with the history of human redemption, why should scholars give attention to the role of nature in the Bible?

Cauthen (1998:2) says the motif of discontinuity in general, and the sharp distinctions between the world and God, reason and faith, nature and humanity, and nature and history in particular, which characterised neo-orthodox Protestant theology in the twentieth century (from about 1918 to 1960), have their roots in European thought that go back as far as Descartes in the seventeenth century (Cauthen 1998:2). Descartes believed that reality consisted of two kinds of things: bodies that are extended but not conscious, and minds that are conscious but not extended. According to this view, the material world is like a giant machine. In the midst of this

materialistic, deterministic, mechanistic world live human beings as thinking, feeling beings with the capacity for free choice and moral judgment. Cauthen (1998:2) claims that

[t]he neo-orthodox theology in the first half of the 20th century stood in this long tradition of distinguishing between nature as dealt with by science and history as the primary arena in which human beings encounter the God of judgment and grace.

Going back even further, Thomas Berry (1978:2-5) is of the opinion that two responses in the West to the Black Death in the fourteenth century have contributed to the neglect and disgracing of nature. From these two responses were formed two communities of the present: the believing redemption community and the secular scientific community. Within Christianity, he says, redemption mystique became the dominant form of Christian experience, which paved the way for the theological construct of redemption history. According to Berry (1978:2), this excessive emphasis on human redemption affected the integrity of the Christian story, and resulted in the neglect of creation doctrines.

Almost four decades ago, H. Paul Santmire (1976:462) showed that a sharp distinction between nature and history triggered a heated debate in the 1970s between what he called political theologians who emphasised justice, and ecological theologians who emphasised survival. Santmire (1976:462) claims that the problem of properly conceptualising and expressing the relationship between nature and history was the most fundamental area requiring the joint attention of these theological opponents. According to him

the ecological theologian sometimes falls prey to the traditional romantic danger of submerging the distinctively human dimension of the created order in nature, thereby undercutting the biblical norm of social justice. On the other hand, political theologians are sometimes prone to the opposite danger, so historicizing their conceptualization of reality that nature comes to be treated, as it generally was in 19th century continental

Protestant thought and on into the 20th century, as a *mere stage* for history. But this kind of theology plays into the hands of the exploiters of the biosphere, especially the dominant classes in the affluent West. In the modern West, the acting on the stage of nature has become so destructive... that it threatens to destroy the stage itself (Santmire 1976:462, original emphasis).

Santmire (1976:462) concludes with a question to which he did not attempt to give an answer at that stage: “If theologians are to develop theologies with a tangible and comprehensive ecological dimension, how should they conceptualize and express the realities of nature and history and their interrelationship?”

Hessel (2001:187-202) has proposed eight steps toward an ecologically reformed church. The first of these steps is an attempt to offer an answer to Santmire’s question. Christians need to acknowledge and abandon at least four bad theological habits or alienating themes that malformed the church’s understanding of and relationship to nature (Hessel 2001:187). All four bad habits are related to sharp distinctions that have characterised Western thought: the revelation of God in historical events rather than in natural life, the separation of humanity from nature, the separation of redemption from creation, and assumptions about the domination of men over women (cf. Hessel 2001:187-188). With regard to the history-nature dualism, Hessel (2001:187) says:

Christian thought separated God from nature. God was understood to be revealed primarily in historical events rather than in natural life. And God’s transcendence was emphasized much more than God’s immanence or living presence in creation. Reformed theology ... intensified this bad habit in the way it interpreted the sovereignty of God, the authority of Scripture, and the human deputy-ship to dominate nature.

Hessel (2001:188) suggests that overcoming these “bad theological habits” involves decontaminating inherited Christian doctrine and liturgy, and reconstructing faith affirmations and worship patterns to express more holistic organic models of God’s relation to nature, and to undergird the human vocation of earth-keeping on a finite,

fragile planet.

The afore-mentioned scholars who have reflected on the history-nature dichotomy have also hinted at possible solutions to problems related to this dualism. I would like to highlight two sets of proposed solutions, which will receive more attention in the next section of this study:

- **Exchanging an emphasis on history for an emphasis on nature.**

Santmire (2000:16-17) says we are told that today's situation of global ecological crisis requires a religious worldview that "cools down history", because "Christianity heats up history over against nature". This attempted solution characterises the stance of the ecological theologians that opposed political theologians in the 1970s, as explained above (cf. Santmire (1976:463). According to Santmire (2000:17) the teachings of "eccentric teachers" such as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, and indigenous interpreters of primal religions who have kept alive a profound sense for the healing powers of nature also exemplify this stance. Loader (19987:12) warns against the irony that the discovery of the human-nature or history-nature polarities has tended to perpetuate the polarity. The only difference seems to be that the one-sidedness has shifted from history (or humans) to nature. Loader's observation will be explored in more detail below.

- **Engaging in a kind of rethinking which does not assume idealistic and dualistic categories in its analysis of biblical texts (cf. Hiebert 1996:27).**

Hessel, for example, proposes that theologians give expression to more holistic, organic models of the relationship between nature and history, which implies that "God's project, involving humans, is Earth community, not only Christian community" (Hessel 2001:202). A related suggestion is that human history be integrated with the story of the universe (Swimme and Tucker 2011; Berry 2006:17-23). Below I look into the possibility that the use of idealistic and dualistic categories can be overcome by looking into the role of history and narrative in the formation of environmental values, and the interconnections between the histories of people and those of their environments.

DOWNPLAYING HISTORY IN FAVOUR OF NATURE – A HELPFUL SOLUTION?

In the 1970s Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland and Richard Fisch published a book titled *Change: principles of problem formation and problem resolution* which was an outgrowth of their joint work at the Brief Therapy Center of the Mental Research Institute at Palo Alto. Although their ideas were given shape in the field of psychotherapy, the premises regarding problem formation and resolution are applicable in the much wider and more general areas of human interaction. They argue that one of the most common fallacies about change is the conclusion that if something is bad, its opposite or counterpoint must of necessity be good (Watzlawick et al. 1974:19). In terms of this notion, the accusation that Christianity heats up history over against nature would imply that emphasis on history is bad, since the wellbeing of nature needs to be stressed in our time of environmental crisis. Watzlawick and his colleagues (1974:20) point out that the invocation of a stark contrast has been a favourite propaganda strategy of politicians and dictators. A Nazi poster asked: “National Socialism or Bolshevik chaos?”, implying that there were only these two alternatives and that all people of good will should make the obvious choice. A little sticker was affixed to hundreds of these posters by an underground group. The sticker read “Erdäpfel oder Kartoffel?” (Spuds or Potatoes?). The stickers, which triggered off a huge Gestapo investigation, exposed the strange interdependence of opposites. Watzlawick et al. (1974) point out that this phenomenon was already known to Heraclitus, a great philosopher of change. He called it *enantiodromia*. The concept was taken up by Carl Jung (1952:375) who saw in it a fundamental psychic mechanism: “Every psychological extreme secretly contains its own opposite or stands in some sort of intimate and essential relation to it ... There is no hallowed custom that cannot on occasion turn into its opposite.”

Interestingly, when emphasis moves from one element of a contrasting pair to the other, the identity of the system is preserved (Watzlawick et al. 1974:21). They point out that history offers an embarrassingly long list of revolutions whose end results were, by and large, more of the same conditions which the revolution had set out to

overthrow and replace by what was perceived as a radically new world.

They based their theories about change, especially how change occurs with problem resolution, on two abstract and general theories drawn from the field of mathematical logic. These are the theory of groups, and the theory of logical types (Watzlawick et al. 1974:2-12). Group theory gave them a framework for thinking about the kind of change that can occur within a system that itself does not change. The theory of logical types gave them a frame for considering the peculiar metamorphosis which is in the nature of shifts from one logical level to the next higher level. They concluded that there are two different types of change: one that occurs within a given system which itself remains unchanged (first order change), and one whose occurrence changes the system itself (second order change) (Watzlawick et al. 1974:10). First order change can be compared to how an air-conditioning system operates: When it is too hot, adjust the air conditioner to produce colder air; when it is too cold, do the opposite. The same system produces both hot and cold air. Second order change, however, can be compared to the shifting of a car's gears. In first gear, the car can adequately deal with a particular terrain. Within a particular speed range the car can go faster or slower. On different terrain a gear change may be required which introduces a whole new speed range within which the car can go faster or slower.

An important element of the theory of Watzlawick et al. (1974:81) is the realisation that, in order to bring about second order change, the decisive action is applied to the attempted solution – to that which is being done to deal with the difficulty – and not necessarily to the difficulty itself. This insight prompted me to focus on the suggested solution to the problem of heating up history over against nature, namely cooling down history. Cooling down history would amount to first order change (introducing more cold air to a system that largely remains intact), while second order change might offer a framework that renders the previously attempted solution obsolete.

In the case of complex social problems, first order change seldom results in an adequate solution to the problem. The seeker might be caught in an illusion of

alternatives, which blinds him/her to other, perhaps not obvious, solutions which are available at the time. Drawing on an aphorism of Wittgenstein, the way out of the fly bottle is through the least obvious opening (cf. Watzlawick et al. 1974:91).

A technique employed to bring about second order change is “reframing”. To reframe means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the facts of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning. What turns out to be changed as a result of reframing is the meaning attributed to the situation, and therefore its consequences (cf. Watzlawick 1974:95). Watzlawick et al. (1974:98-99) explain the need for and value of reframing:

- Our experience of the world is based on the categorisation of the objects of our perception into classes (for example “nature” and “history”). These classes are mental constructs and therefore of a totally different order of reality than objects or events themselves. Classes are formed not only on the basis of the physical properties of objects, or the historical accuracy of events, but especially on the strength of their meaning and value for us. Categories such as “nature”, for example, are particularly valued by those involved in discourses on environmental values.
- Once an object is conceptualised as the member of a given class, it is extremely difficult to see it as belonging also to another class. This class membership of an object serves as its “reality”. To stick to this view of reality appears to be the obvious thing to do. When we get used to perceiving “history” and “nature” as clearly distinct, even opposing categories, our attention is drawn away from considering the possibility that elements of nature can have a history.
- What makes reframing such an effective tool of change is that once we do perceive the alternative class membership(s) we cannot so easily go back to the trap and the anguish of a former view of “reality”.

I believe that the thoughts of John O’Neill, Alan Holland and Andrew Light (2008) on the relationship between nature and history amount to a reframing of the opposition between history and nature, which exemplifies second order change.

THE INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE HISTORIES OF HUMANS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTS

A central claim that emerges from the work of O'Neill et al. (2008:148) is that we need to take history seriously in our understanding of environmental values, because the concept of the natural as opposed to the artificial, or nature as opposed to culture, is historical.

The concept of “naturalness” is a spatio-temporal concept. There is no such thing as a state or condition of something which constitutes its “being natural”. Being natural is, and is only, determined by origin and by history: it is a spatio-temporal concept, not a descriptive one.

Robert Goodin (1992:26-27) develops this point well. In non-theological language he argues:

... what it is that makes natural resources valuable is their very naturalness. That is to say, what imparts value to them is not any physical attributes or properties that they might display. Rather, it is the history and process of their creation ... [T]hey were created by natural processes rather than by artificial human ones.

O'Neill et al. (2008:133) point out that this historical dimension to environmental valuation, of course, is not confined to things that are natural. It applies also to humanly modified landscapes.

These ideas also have implications for our understanding of the concept of wilderness. It cannot refer to a primitive, original state. Any wilderness is also a cultural landscape with its own history. Reference to wilderness could suppress part of a story that can be told of a landscape. Non-European native occupants of a wilderness area are themselves sometimes treated as part of the “natural scheme”, or the “wilderness”. Their history as dwellers in a landscape which embodies their own cultural history is made invisible (cf O'Neill et al. 2008:133). According to the biblical book of Ezekiel, those who were in exile spoke of the empty land to which they hoped to return that was made desolate and waste. Did the way they referred to their former homeland also make the cultural history of those who remained behind in

the former Judah, and the land itself, invisible?

A fascinating outcome of stressing the importance of history for valuing nature is the idea of ecocultural restoration rather than ecological restoration as such (cf. Higgs 2003). Human activity is an integral part of the history of a particular environment, and the environment embodies the history of a community.

O'Neill et al (2008:145) explains that attaching significance to particular places, objects and people is a matter of their history. He values them not merely as a cluster of properties.

It is this person, with their vices as well as virtues, that we love, not simply an instantiation of a cluster of properties. Hence Montaigne's much quoted observation: "If I were pressed to say why I love him, I feel that my only reply could be: 'Because it was he, because it was I'" (O'Neill et al. 2008:145).

For this reason humans are reluctant to accept the promise of restoration of a forest, for example, after it had been destroyed to make room for something else. What would be produced later would not be the same forest since its history would be different. It is the particular forest with its particular historical identity, bearing the imprint of the lives of a community that went before us, that gives the place its significance in our lives today. On the other hand, some acts of restoration themselves form part of the human history of our relation to the natural world and can be justified in those terms. These acts of restoration receive their justification through some sense of what is the appropriate continuation of the story of a place (cf. O'Neill et al. 2008:146). Restoration therefore can be understood as a way of redeeming past wrongs, as a means of restitution – a human process that complements nature's ways of dealing with "setbacks". Hence, nature also has a "redemption history", and humans can play a part in it.

The problem of a particular person, place, or object can be conceived as how best to continue their narrative. Human involvement in the environment would therefore be about

preserving the future as a realisation of the potential of the past ... It is about negotiating the transition from past to future in such a way as to secure the transfer of significance (Holland and Rawles 1994:37).

Natural environments have histories that stretch out before humans emerged and they have a future that will continue beyond the disappearance of the human species. Furthermore, we humans make sense of our lives by placing them in a larger narrative context, of what happens before us and what comes after. Environments matter because they embody that larger context (O'Neill et al. 2008:198).

THE PRIESTLY CREATION ACCOUNT AND THE CREATION OF MEANING

The Priestly (P) creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:4a may have been an attempt to make sense of the situation of a community in crisis by placing (elements of) their story in a larger (cosmic) context of what had happened before their time and what, hopefully, may come after, which was an attempt to imagine an appropriate continuation of their (hi)story.

The exilic experience shattered the Judean community's self-confident Zionist theology, which was based on the pillars of land/city, king and temple – all of which were lost during the exile. The exilic experience robbed this community of the story they lived by. How could they then construct a new, hopeful story that was still their story? In other words, how could they negotiate the transition from past to future in such a way as to ensure that their narrative be continued?

The Priestly author opted for placing elements of their story, particularly the temple motif, and perhaps also the kingship motif, in a larger narrative context – a story of the cosmos, of what happened before them and what may happen after. The rest of this article confines itself to observations drawn from studies that focus on the links between cosmos and temple in P's creation account.

Many scholars have noted the links between cosmos and temple in Genesis 1. Umberto Cassuto (1961:13-15), Jon Levenson (1985:143-144; 1988:67-68), Moshe

Weinfeld (1981:503) and Gordon Wenham (1987:6), for example, have commented on the sevenfold structure of creation in Genesis 1 and its parallels in temple and tabernacle building endeavours. Weinfeld (1981:510) claims that the *Sitz im Leben* of Genesis 1 is the temple liturgy. In similar vein Vervenne (2001:53) describes the unfolding of creation as a “cosmic liturgical celebration” culminating on the seventh day.

This association between temple and creation is not unique to the Genesis creation accounts, or the Hebrew Bible, nor is the sevenfold structure. Temples in the ancient Near East often had cosmological connotations. A good example of ancient Near Eastern temple building is found in the Sumerian Gudea Cylinders. Morrow (s.a.:7-9) lists several parallels between Genesis 1 and this text, ranging from a seven day dedication of the temple, the association of temple building to kinship/rulership, temple building being connected with fertility, pronouncement of blessing on the temple, a formal announcement of the completion of the temple, and laudatory descriptions of the temple.

John H. Walton (2009:14-35; 2010:1) contends that Genesis 1 is ancient cosmology, and that ancient cosmology is function-oriented. To create something means to give it a function, not material properties. Therefore, he claims, the Hebrew word *bara* should be understood within a functional ontology. It means to assign a role or function through separation (Genesis 1) or naming (Genesis 2). Van Wolde (2009a; 2009b) also argues that in Genesis 1 the meaning of *bara* is to separate, rather than to create. A word study done by Walton shows that the direct object of the verb *bara* is always a functional entity, not a material object. He says the beginning state in Genesis 1 is portrayed in non-functional, non-productive terms (*tohu* and *bohu*) in which matter already exists. Days 1 to 3 establish functions, whereas days 4 to 6 install functionaries. Walton (2010:3) points out that in this creation account also the description of humans is in functional terms: from the image of God through the blessing – even being created male and female. He argues that if cosmic origins are described here in functional terms, and follow the pattern of temple building texts, the point is made that the cosmic temple is here being made functional.

When a temple was built, it became functional not when all the physical work had been done ... but in an inauguration ceremony that in a variety of texts throughout the ancient world lasted seven days. During those seven days, the functions of the temple were identified, the functionaries installed, the priests commissioned and most importantly that which represented the deity was brought into the centre of the sacred space where he took up his rest.

In the ancient Near East temples were built so that gods could rest in them. Rest is not a term of disengagement, but a sign that everything is in place, stable and secure and life and the cosmos may proceed as they were intended (cf. Walton 2010:3). Stability and functionality has been achieved through the creation of an order where everything in the cosmos has its counterpart. There are the heavens and earth; light and darkness; waters above and waters below; dry land and waters that had been gathered together; plants that bear fruit and plants that do not; the greater and the lesser lights; male and female humans; and on a different level functions and functionaries (to use Walton's categories). Even those who have been assigned to have dominion on earth have their counterparts in the heavens: the greater and lesser lights that rule the day and the night respectively. Most of these counterparts exist due to the act of separation (*badal*) – a term which is often associated with priestly duties in the temple (cf. Lv 10:10; 11:47; 20:25; Ez 22:26). There the priest separated (*badal*) clean from unclean.

In the ancient Near East and in the Bible the cosmos was understood to be a gigantic temple (Is 66:1), and temples were designed to be a micro-cosmos (see the description of the Garden of Eden and the temple vision of Ezekiel). Walton concludes that there is rich symbolism in the tabernacle/temple furniture and decor and that Genesis 1 is portraying origins in terms that would be recognised as a temple building account.

Van Dyk (2009:423-424) adds another dimension to the link between cosmos and temple. He argues that the similarities between temple and cosmos are not symbolic as Walton and others suggest, but should be understood in terms of a magico-mythical worldview, which strengthens the link between human history and the story of the

cosmos even further. Van Dyk (2009:422) claims that the link between creation and temple, the emphasis on the order of creation, and the concept of *imago dei* can be explained in terms of magical linkage within a magico-mythical horizon of understanding. He explains that myths presuppose magical links that exist between heaven and earth and between magically linked phenomena on earth (van Dyk 2005:868). Myths present magical links as embedded within the “order” of creation. Frazer (1957:14) observes that the logic of sympathetic magic depends on two related laws: the law of similarity and the law of contagion. According to the law of similarity, similarities between objects link them in a magical sense: like produces like and an effect resembles its cause. According to the law of contagion, things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other, despite the lack of physical contact ever since.

People sharing a magico-mythical horizon regard mythical links as just as real as physical causes and effects. The sacredness of a subject would depend on its magical link to the divine, which explains why the presence of God in the temple was experienced as real. Van Dyk (2009:431) concludes that the similarities between cosmos (or heavenly temple) and earthly temple had to be clear for all to see in order to effect a magical link. He lists a number of similarities that prove his point: the careful east-west orientation of the temple aligned it with the earth, the two columns in front of the temple were seen as the equivalent of the two cosmic pillars on the eastern horizon, and the molten sea or metal basin outside the temple was seen as analogous to the deep or primeval sea.

With regard to the creation of order, van Dyk (2009:433) contends that the fact that God has established the order of creation suggests a form of contagion. The concept of *imago dei* is another example of the law of similarity. Van Dyk (2009:434) describes the logic of magic in this instance as follows:

The argument of Genesis 1:26 therefore runs as follows: Humans are magically linked to God, humans can be described as God’s representatives on earth and He can act through them in the same way than through any other magical link. This magical interpretation of the

imago dei also fits the description in Genesis 1:28 that humans were to rule over the animals as God's representatives.

I have selected this text deliberately, not only because of its relevance for the issue under discussion, but also because (part of) it has been regarded by many as a highly problematic text from an ecotheological point of view. Norman Habel (2009:7), for example, asserts:

Earth in this grey [not green] text is a domain to be overpowered by those creatures who bear God's image. The mandate to 'subdue' provides a justification for de-powering and devaluing not only Earth creatures but also Earth itself.

First, a remark on ecotheological interpretations of biblical texts in general. In the act of textual interpretation, problems stand in at least three relationships to a text:

- a problem situation moves the reader to consult the Bible;
- the reader experiences the text itself as problematic;
- the text itself offers a response to a problem situation (the text may overtly report on, or covertly assume a problem situation).

Ecotheological interpretations of the Bible tend to focus on the first two: (a) the global ecological crisis provides Bible readers with a lens through which they read the Bible or the questions to which they seek answers, and (b) reading the Bible through this lens sometimes results in finding particular texts problematic. Habel (2009, 2011) calls such texts grey (as opposed to green) texts. However, few ecological interpretations of the Bible have grappled with the problem(s) to which the text may have been a response. I think all three vantage points need to be taken seriously. They shed light from different angles; they bring different issues into view, or keep them from view. I hope to show that considering the problem(s) to which the first creation account may have been a response also deserves our attention.

In a chapter titled "The cosmic temple", William Brown (2010:33-77) offers a fascinating interpretation of this creation story. He points out that many temples of the ancient Near East, particularly in the Syro-Palestinian region, followed a threefold

structure, a pattern also found in the literary symmetry of the Genesis text. For example, the temple described in 1 Kings 6 consisted of an outer vestibule portico, flanked by two pillars, the nave or main room, and an inner sanctuary or holy of holies.

This threefold arrangement of sacred space corresponds to the way in which the various days of creation are distributed both chronologically and thematically. The first six days, by virtue of their correspondence, establish the architectural boundaries of the space. The last day inhabits, as it were, the most holy space. As creation unfolds “daily,” it becomes constructed in the *imago templi*, in the model of a temple (Brown 2010:40).

With regard to rulers and kingship: the Priestly creation account acknowledges the magisterial character of God, while describing the non-imperious ways God goes about fashioning a world of ordered complexity (Brown 2010:33). Fretheim (1994:345) refers to this way of creating the world as consultative, and involving a democratising of power. God consults the council of deities by saying “Let us make humankind ...” (1:26). Does the harsh language in 1:28 (subduing the earth, and having dominion over the fish and land animals) not reflect the experiences of this community – being traumatised by a foreign ruler who subdued and dominated the people in exile? Does this passage perhaps suggest that power should be “democratised” by putting it in the hands of humanity (*adam*) instead of individual, fierce rulers? In the book of Revelations, similarly, priesthood will not be the prerogative of a select few any more – all believers will be “priests”. The gospel writers referred to the kingdom of God. The life of Jesus showed that this “kingdom” was a radical alternative to what people understood by the word “kingdom” – a radical alternative to how rulers acted in his time. Can the “dominion” language in Genesis 1 be understood in this way, based on people’s experiences in exile?

Furthermore, not only humans are told to rule parts of creation. In 1:18 the great lights are set in the sky “to rule over the day and over the night”. In accordance with the first differentiation God made (between the heavens and the earth, 1:1) God

appoints two sets of rulers:

- the great lights that are associated with day (masculine) and night (feminine) respectively (1:18), and
- humanity, which was created male and female (1:27).

With regard to land: this creation account does not only encourage the exiles to reframe their understanding of worship (temple) and kingship, but also their understanding of home or their sense of place. The cosmos, created by God, becomes home. Home is where a person is fed, and can experience safety, intimacy, and rest.

God carefully prepared a home for humanity and other members of the earth community, especially through his acts of differentiation. In order to create a home for human beings, God separated the waters below from dry land, and the dry land in turn would differentiate between food for humans and food for other land creatures.

God's separating acts are echoed by the remarkable symmetrical structure of this creation account. Days 1 and 4 are about light and the bearers of light. Days 2 and 5 are about the waters and the skies, and the inhabitants thereof. Days 3 and 6 are about dry land and plants, and the animals and people who live there and who need the plants for food. Brown (2010:39) suggests that even day 7 (2:1-3, the day of rest) has its counterpart, namely day 0 (1:2, creation's initial, pre-creative condition).

Both the acts of separation or differentiation and the structural symmetry suggest that everything in creation stands in relation to something else, and they all have a common origin. However, at the same time this carefully constructed creation is vulnerable. Creation in reverse is possible, and it indeed occurred according to the flood story in Genesis 6-9. Human wickedness set in motion the process of creation in reverse.

Finally, this structure and several details in this creation account show that creation is a highly dynamic reality. It has its own story, or history. The two fundamental elements of narrative, time and space, form the backbone of this account. From day 1 onwards it is possible to speak of day that is followed by night and so forth. On day 4 the great lights are created. They are for signs and for seasons and for days and years (1:14). Through acts of separation God creates space. Ellen van Wolde

(1997:19) concludes:

Gen. 1 is not just about the creation of the beginning, but about creation and procreation, about the beginning of all things and the continuation of all things. That makes it surprising that in the discussion between supporters of the doctrine of creation and supporters of the theory of evolution a conflict is created which is not in the text. Genesis is not about creation or evolution, but about creation *and* evolution in a non-technical sense. This text shows the beginning of all things as a creation of God which is aimed at continuation and development.

CONCLUSIONS

This study focuses on problematic dichotomies, in particular the history-nature dualism which has characterised influential strands of Western theological thought. Theologians in this tradition tended to overemphasise (salvation) history and downgrade nature. Those who have accused Christianity of contributing to the current ecological crisis have *inter alia* focused on such dualistic thought patterns that informed negative ideas towards nature. In this study I explored two sets of proposed solutions to problems related to drawing a sharp distinction between history and nature. Studies on problem formation and problem resolution have suggested that a reframing of the proposed solution that history must be “cooled down” in favour of nature might be necessary. I then attempted to show that history and narrative are fundamental to what is perceived as “nature”. Our storied environments embody the stories we live. The first creation account in the Bible may have been an attempt at “restorying” the lives of a shattered community in terms of the story of their world. Their home is the cosmos instead of a particular land; at the same time the cosmos is their temple; and on a cosmic scale the exercise of power happens in ways that differ from what the exiles were experiencing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berry, T 1978. *The new story*. Teilhard Studies, No. 1. Chambersburg, PA: Anima Press.
- _____. 2006. *Evening thoughts. Reflecting on earth as sacred community*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Brown, W P 2010. *The seven pillars of creation. The Bible, science and the ecology of wonder*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Cassuto, U 1961. *From Adam to Noah. A commentary on the book of Genesis I-VI*, trans. Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem: Magness Press.
- Caquot, A, & Delcor, M (eds.) 1981. *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Henrie Cazelles*. Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker.
- Cauthen, K 1998. Christianity and ecology: the emergence of Christian biopolitics. Paper prepared for a Forum on Eco-justice, sponsored by "Save the Bay", a Civic Environmental Group, and the Rhode Island State Council of Churches, September 28, 1996, Providence, Rhode Island. Available: <http://www.frontiernet.net/~kenc/ecology.htm> [Accessed 2014/11/10].
- Conradie, E M 2005. *An ecological Christian anthropology: at home on Earth?* Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Fretheim, T E 1994. The book of Genesis. Introduction, commentary, and reflections, in Keck 1994/I:319-674.
- Goodin, R 1992. *Green political theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Habel, N 2009. *An inconvenient text*. Adelaide: ATF Press.
- _____. 2011. *The birth, the curse and the greening of Earth. An ecological reading of Genesis 1-11*. Sheffield: Phoenix Press.
- Hessel, D (ed.) 1996. *Theology for earth community. A field guide*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- _____. 2001. Conclusion: the Church ecologically reformed, in Hessel & Rasmussen 2001:185-216.
- Hessel, D & Rasmussen, L (eds.) 2001. *Earth habitat. Eco-injustice and the Church's response*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Hiebert, T 1996. Rethinking traditional approaches to nature in the Bible, in Hessel 1996:23-30.
- Higgs, E 2003. *Nature by design*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Holland, A & Rawles, K 1994. The ethics of conservation. Report presented to The Countryside Council for Wales. Thingmount Series, No. 1. Lancaster University: Department of Philosophy.
- Horrell, D G, Hunt, C, Southgate, C, Stavropoulou, F (eds.) 2010. *Ecological hermeneutics. Biblical, historical and theological perspectives*. London: T&T Clark International.
- Jung, C G 1952. *Symbols of transformation*. New York: Bollingen Foundation.
- Keck, L E (Convenor of board of editors) 1994. *The new interpreter's Bible. A commentary in twelve volumes*. Vol. 1. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- King, M L Jr 1963. *Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 1963*.
- Levenson, J D 1985. *Sinai and Zion: an entry into the Jewish Bible*. Minneapolis: Winston Press.
- Levenson, J D 1988. *Creation and the persistence of evil: the Jewish drama of divine omnipotence*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Loader, 1987. Image and order: Old Testament perspectives on the ecological crisis, in Vorster 1987:6-28.

- Morrow, J [s.a.]. Creation as temple-building and work as liturgy in Genesis 1-3. Available: www.ocabs.org/journal/index.php/jocabs/article/viewFile/43/18 [Accessed 2013/05/15].
- O'Neill, J, Holland, A, Light, A 2008. *Environmental values*. Oxon, New York: Routledge.
- Rogerson, J W 2010. The creation stories: their ecological potential and problems, in Horrell et al. 2010:21-31.
- Santmire, H P 1976. Ecology, justice and theology: beyond the preliminary skirmishes, *Christian Century* 93(May 12):460-464.
- _____. 2000. *Nature reborn. The ecological and cosmic promise of Christian theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Simkins, R A 1994. *Creator & creation*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Swimme, B T & Tucker, M E 2011. *Journey of the universe*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Van Dyk, P J 2005. Mythical linkage and mythical frameworks, *OTE* 18/3:863-878.
- _____. 2009. Creation, temple and magic. A magico-mythical reading of Genesis 1, *OTE* 22/2:422-436.
- Van Wolde, E 2009a. *Terug naar het Begin. Waarom Genesis 1,1 niet gaat over Gods Schepping van Hemel en Aarde*. Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers.
- _____. 2009b. Why the verb ברא does not mean "to create" in Genesis 1.1-2.4a, *JSOT* 34/1:3-23.
- Vervenne, M 2001. The compositional texture of the Priestly overture to the Pentateuch, in Wénin 2001:35-79.
- Von Rad, G 1984. *The problem of the Hexateuch and other essays*. London: SCM Press.
- Vorster, W S (ed.) 1987. *Are we killing God's earth? Ecology and theology*. Miscellanea Congregalia 30. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Walton, J H 2009. *The lost world of Genesis One. Ancient cosmology and the origins debate*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Walton, J H 2010. Genesis 1 as ancient cosmology. Available:<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/genesis1357910.shtml> [Accessed 2013/05/15].
- Watzlawick, P, Weakland, J, Fisch, R 1974. *Change. Principles of problem formation and problem resolution*. New York, London: W W Norton and Company.
- Weinfeld, M 1981. Sabbath, temple and the enthronement of the Lord – the problem of the *Sitz im Leben* of Genesis 1:1-2:3, in Caquot & Delcor 1981:501-512.
- Wellhausen, J 1957. *Prolegomena to the history of ancient Israel*. Transl. Black and Menzies. New York: Meridian Books.
- Wenham G J 1987. *Genesis 1-15*. Word Biblical Commentary Volume I. Waco, Texas: Word Books.
- Wénin, A (ed.) 2001. *Studies in the book of Genesis: literature, redaction and history*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- White, L 1967. The historical roots of our ecologic crisis, *Science* 155:1203-1207; 156:737-738.
- Wright, G E 1952. *God who acts: biblical theology as recital*. Studies in Biblical Theology. London: SCM Press.