An Inconvenient Text



Norman Habel

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Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?

Norman Habel



ATF Press
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In memory of
Alfred von Rohr Sauer
my mentor and second father
who would have been 100
as I write
my preface
6 December 2008
and his wife
Ellie Sauer
my second mother

Acknowledgments

This is a generalist book written for a broad audience. Much of the material on which this volume is based is found in scholarly articles scattered in books and journals around the globe. This version, I hope, will reach numerous people who are concerned about the way in which the Bible has been used uncritically to support green thinking. In this volume, I dare to face the reality that the Bible is an inconvenient text that includes not only 'green texts' but 'grey texts'—texts that do not reflect a genuine concern for creation or empathy for Earth.

My work in this field—including the more academic volumes, *The Earth Bible* project and *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*—has been supported over the years by The Charles Strong Memorial Trust. Without the backing of the Trust most of this work would not have been possible.

As readers will note, there are a number of references in this book to personal connections with Kangaroo Island, an island south of Adelaide in South Australia. On Kangaroo Island I have a deep sense of the spiritual in the sea, the lagoons, the native flora and the fauna—especially the blue wrens, the fairy penguins, and echidna. On this island I hear the voice of Earth saying thanks for keeping the beaches and countryside pristine.

My thanks are extended to John Pfitzner and Alan Cadwallader whose critical reviews of this volume have been greatly appreciated.

My thanks also to Joh Wurst who has been a meticulous editor of my writings over the years.

My special thanks for Jan, my wife, who has supported me with genuine concern over the years!

I also need to make it clear that my naming of certain biblical texts as 'green' preceded any knowledge of *The Green Bible* published by HarperCollins in 2008. It will become immediately clear to the reader that I and *The Green Bible* differ considerably in our approach.

Preface

Norman Habel has written a book that has been needed for some time. Aptly entitled *An Inconvenient Text*, it is a rigorous analysis of the ecological ambivalence of Scripture. Eschewing cosmetic cover-ups, he insists on an honest look at the Bible in light of the twenty-first century worldview of where humanity fits on planet Earth. From this perspective, favorite texts such as those concerning the mandate to dominate, the mighty acts of God, and the right to the promised land come in for radically new interpretations.

The revolutionary and unique task Habel sets himself is a hard-headed reading from a postmodern, scientific, ecological worldview. This is not a matter of finding 'green' passages in the Bible, or even of rescuing questionable—which he calls 'grey'—ones. Rather, it is a move away from the modern individualistic anthropocentric paradigm at the heart of our insatiable consumer culture that has fueled the twin crises of climate change and economic collapse. Taking a different perspective—the view of the interrelationship and interdependence of all life-forms, including human beings—Habel has produced a wonderfully readable, passionate, and incisive book that is a major contribution to the religion and ecology conversation.

That conversation has become considerably more sophisticated over the last forty years, with Professor Habel as one of the principal participants. What began as an attempt to 'save the Bible' through reading problematic texts in terms of what they 'could' mean or 'did' mean, and to identify texts that showed Jesus' fondness for natural settings (as well as fig trees and hens), has resulted in a realisation that the religions of the world can contribute to the destruction, or to the flourishing, of our planet.

Religions are major players in forming people's most basic assumptions about who we are in the scheme of things, and about what we should be doing. As counter-cultural worldviews, they offer one of the few critiques of the reigning individualistic consumer sensibility that is destroying our planet. They can also suggest more just and sustainable alternatives. It is difficult to over-emphasise the seriousness of the climatic and financial crises that are calling into question our mismanagement of the earth. The task of religious scholars is no longer to try to redeem their own

traditions as 'green' in some way or another; rather, the issue is their mandate to contribute to a just and sustainable worldview for planetary flourishing.

Norman Habel's book is about this task. He takes his hermeneutical stance from within the twenty-first century ecological worldview and asks whether the Bible can be partner in our planetary agenda. As he writes, 'A greening of biblical studies means standing in a very different place when we read. We stand with Earth and read for Earth and the Earth community.'

In this important and lively book, Habel grounds his insightful comments in a particular context—stories from his own Australia—that gives 'voice' to Earth—not only in general but in particular. It is rare to find a book that is at the same time a major contribution to the most important conversation of our time—and delightful read.

An Inconvenient Text is such a book.

Sallie McFague
Vancouver School of Theology, Canada
November 2008

Foreword

Ecological problems such as climate change require a multidisciplinary approach in which every one of us is called upon to play a role. Despite the earlier criticisms by Lynn White Jr and others regarding the complicity of Christianity in environmental destruction, it has now become clear that the role of religion will be critical in addressing such destruction. Several observers have recognised the potential of the world's religious traditions to offer the necessary inspiration, spiritual vision, ecological wisdom, ethical discernment, moral power, and hope to sustain an ecological transformation of the global economy and the widespread culture of consumerism. Religious traditions can offer the mystic motivation and enthusiasm that no secular or government initiatives can muster on such a wide scale. Indeed, if the cultural and economic habits of the world's 6.7 billion people are to be so radically transformed within a few decades, the role of faith communities will be crucial.

Given the historical impact of Christianity on those Western countries that have contributed most to environmental degradation, it should be evident that nothing less than an ecological reformation of Christianity itself is required. Christian ecotheology may be understood as a response to this challenge. Almost every aspect of Christian theology has come under the spotlight in this ecological reformation: Biblical Studies, Biblical hermeneutics, the history of Christianity, Christian doctrine, Christian virtues and values, preaching, ministry, pastoral care, ecclesial structures, Christian education, Christian ministries and mission, and theology of religions.

Norman Habel has done more than anyone else to employ an ecological hermeneutics in biblical interpretation—through the *Earth Bible* series, through the seminar on ecological hermeneutics under the umbrella of the Society for Biblical Literature, in a recent volume *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* and now, in *An Inconvenient Text*. Moreover, through his work on the Season of Creation he has also contributed to liturgical renewal and institutional transformation. Those of us working in academic and ecclesial contexts elsewhere in the world owe considerable gratitude to Norm Habel for his pioneering work in this regard, and for the relentless energy that he brings to this task.

It is probably fair to say that the ecological hermeneutics developed through the *Earth Bible* series and refined in this volume is one of the most radical forms of biblical hermeneutics imaginable. It deeply challenges readers to be suspicious about received anthropocentric views regarding the Bible, the Christian faith, ecclesial practices, and their own lifestyles. On this basis one may also explore the impact of other ecological 'sins' (such as alienation from the Earth community, and domination in the name of differences of gender, race, class, education and species) on the production and interpretation of biblical texts.

In this volume Habel tackles the problem of what he calls 'grey texts' in a typically uncompromising way. What should be done about those biblical texts that reveal an anthropocentric bias and that can only serve to legitimise human exploitation of otherkind? What about portraits of God that seem to devalue nature? His most vehement critique is aimed at interpretations of Genesis 1:26–28 as a benign model of environmental stewardship. Habel insists that this text portrays humans as the culmination of creation—and thereby devalues Earth and commissions humans to subdue Earth. In a similar way Habel shows that 'grey' texts depicting the 'mighty acts of God' and the conquest of the promised land condone the destruction of other creatures.

In response, Habel offers a constructive proposal, based on the core ecological insight that Earth is a precious living habitat, a fragile web of ecosystems, and a community of kin. In chapter 5, building on the six ecojustice principles articulated in the *Earth Bible* project, he proposes a method for dealing with grey texts in three steps: suspicion, identification with Earth, and retrieval of the voice of Earth in the text. This method is helpful in its simplicity and will certainly offer a frame of reference for others adopting an ecological hermeneutics in reading biblical texts to follow or to critique. Habel himself demonstrates how this method may be used creatively in order to read 'grey' texts against their grain. He does this on the basis of a Christological 'canon within the canon' (based on the Lutheran motto of *Was Christum treibet*) in which 'green' trajectories within New Testament texts are employed to critique 'grey' texts and to offer a new vision of service and solidarity in suffering.

In this book we are confronted not only with an inconvenient text that is both 'green' and 'grey', but also with an uncomfortable choice—to listen to the voice of Earth—and an unenviable task: 'to liberate ourselves from the power of those grey texts that have controlled our thinking, and through green texts to listen with empathy to cries of a

suffering creation, and to discern God's presence there'. Habel calls a spade a spade; he refuses to accept easy compromises; he doesn't make the reader's task any easier. But, like a true prophet, he shows us the way towards a new ecological vision.

Ernst Conradie
University of the Western Cape, South Africa
November 2008

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