

Creation utterly Consumed? Towards an Eco-critical Rereading of Zephaniah 1:2-6¹

C. J. (NEELS) REDELINGHUYS (UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE)

ABSTRACT

Few texts from the Hebrew Prophets present such a disconcerting ecological perspective as Zeph 1:2-6. While the text itself has received only scant attention in resources dealing with ecological interpretations of the Bible, it nevertheless becomes clear that Nature plays a multifaceted role that the interpreter should not overlook. Consequently, this article aims to present an eco-critical rereading of the text based on the ecojustice principles of the Earth Bible, and Norman Habel's tools for analysis – suspicion, identification, and retrieval. Such a rereading further uncovers certain questions, problems, and challenges concerning the kinship between humans and Nature. Because it continuously works to avoid anthropocentrism and engages in dialogue with science, the theocentric approach of Gustafson presents itself as a viable way to elucidate this complicated and often misrepresented relationship. Finally, the author suggests, by way of comparison, that such a theocentric reading surpasses the traditional stewardship approach when it comes to an understanding and/or appropriation of the Zeph 1:2-6 in the contemporary context.

KEYWORDS: Zephaniah 1:2-6; The Earth Bible; suspicion; identification; retrieval; stewardship; theocentric approach; Nature and the Hebrew Bible; eco-hermeneutics; ecological criticism.

A INTRODUCTION²

Few texts from the Hebrew Prophets present such a disconcerting perspective of the natural environment as the pericope of Zeph 1:2-6.³ In what one can

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describe as a divine exclamation of grief, the text portrays "God's wrath burning up a creation gone wrong."⁴ Rather eloquently, Robertson explains that the prophecy opens with "the thud of a mighty kettledrum [as] the prophet startles his hearers into a recognition of the solemnity of the hour."⁵ The opening verses of the pericope read as follows:

I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the LORD. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the LORD. I will stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem...⁶

Prophesying during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640-609 B.C.E.),⁷ the prophet notes that there are very specific, interrelated socio-religious issues that warrant the ire of the Deity. These issues of religious malpractice are idolatry, syncretism, and apathy/indifference.⁸ In this regard, YHWH threatens to cut off "every remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests"⁹ together with "those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens."¹⁰ Hereafter, he turns to "those who bow down and swear to the LORD, but also swear by Milcom."¹¹ Finally, the prophet takes issue with "those who have turned back from following the LORD, who have not sought the LORD or inquired of him."¹²

³ Cf. Paul L. Redditt, *Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 311-312.

⁴ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum–Malachi*, IBC (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1986), 63.

⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 258.

⁶ Zephaniah 1:2-4a. All scriptural quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ Cf. Zeph 1:1.

⁸ Cf. Achtemeier, *Nahum–Malachi*, 64; Robert A. Bennett, "The Book of Zephaniah," in *Introduction to the Apocalyptic Literature, Daniel, the Twelve Prophets*, ed. Leander E. Keck, NIB 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 675; Larry L. Walker, "Zephaniah," in *Daniel–Malachi*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ExBC 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 663.

⁹ Zephaniah 1:4b.

¹⁰ Zephaniah 1:5a.

¹¹ Zephaniah 1:5b.

¹² Zephaniah 1:6. It is important to point out that this does not amount to "atheism" in the modern sense of the word. In this particular context, their indifference toward YHWH and his covenant is not a rejection of the existence of metaphysical realities altogether.

De Roche notes that the biblical author takes up the notion that the people's indiscretions may lead to a reversal (or undoing) of Creation.¹³ He explains that whereas the Gen 1 account references the fish and then proceeds to humanity in the final place, the author of Zephaniah, in similar terms, starts with humankind and ends with the fish. This serves to accentuate the point that the people of Judah and Jerusalem stand at the center of YHWH's wrath.¹⁴ In turn, the judgment that befalls nonhuman Creation is an unfortunate side effect, "merely because of their solidarity with mankind... as creatures subordinated to human authority by divine decree."¹⁵ Ultimately, the message is that just as YHWH "was active in the creation of animate life, so on His day He will be active in its 'decreation,' its removal from the earth."¹⁶

To make this notion of the "reversal" more concrete for his (intended) audience, the biblical author alludes to the Flood-narrative of Gen 6-8.¹⁷ Following Sabottka, both Smith and Roberts note that the expression "from the face of the ground" (found twice in vv. 2-3), occurs three times in the flood story – Gen 6:7; 7:4; 8:8.¹⁸ Moreover, Roberts explains that the formulation of Zeph 1:3 bears a striking resemblance to Gen 6:7.¹⁹ Here, in similar fashion, YHWH proclaims his intention to "blot out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air." Contrary though to his plan with Noah, YHWH seemingly will be indiscriminate in his judgment in the context of Zephaniah.²⁰

Finally, the image of YHWH's "outstretched hand" in v. 4 contributes to the portrayal of his judgment writ large. Goldingay explains that the outstretched hand of YHWH "regularly denotes bringing calamity and defeat,

¹³ Michael De Roche, "Zephaniah 1:2-3: The 'Sweeping' of Creation." *VT* 30/1 (1980): 106-107.

¹⁴ Cf. Greg A. King, "The Day of the LORD in Zephaniah," *BSac* 152 (1995): 23; Richard D. Patterson, "Zephaniah," in *Hosea–Malachi*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, CorBC 10 (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 455.

¹⁵ J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 170.

¹⁶ King, "Day of the LORD," 23.

¹⁷ John D. W. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, CBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 156; John Goldingay, "Zephaniah," in *Minor Prophets*, vol. 2, ed. John Goldingay and Pamela J. Scalise, UBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 100.

¹⁸ L. Sabottka, *Zephania* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1972); cited in De Roche, "Zephaniah 1:2-3," 105; Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi*, WBC 32 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 126-127; Roberts, *Nahum*, 169.

¹⁹ Roberts, *Nahum*, 169-170.

²⁰ Cf. Gen 6:8, 18-22; King, "Day of the LORD," 23; Patterson, "Zephaniah," 455; J. Alec Motyer, "Zephaniah," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas E. McComiskey, single vol. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 911.

notably in the exodus story..."²¹ In similar terms, Exod 7:5 for example, frames the image in terms of YHWH's judgment against the Egyptians and to the benefit of Israel.²² In that context, YHWH effects his judgment on Egypt through Moses (and Aaron) in terms of an outstretched hand.²³ However, as was the case with the reversal of Creation, Zephaniah reinterprets this image and transforms it from a positive into something negative for the people: "...the gesture of salvation is now one of judgment."²⁴

B PROBLEM-STATEMENT AND METHODOLOGY

In light of this brief exegetical introduction,²⁵ one cannot help but notice that there is an explicit emphasis on the role and place of nonhuman Creation (henceforth "Nature") in the unfolding of YHWH's judgment against his people. Simultaneously grounded in the language of the Creation and Exodus events (and more implicitly the Sinai-covenant), this role is a multi-layered one and for the purpose of this paper the biblical interpreter can summarize it as follows:

- Nature unwittingly participates (is forced to participate by the people?) in specific acts that evoke the wrath of the Deity.
- Nature suffers at the hands of YHWH because of the people's indiscretions.
- There is also the subtle implication that YHWH will use Nature in some way to punish his people for said indiscretions.

Given these intricacies, it is striking that this particular prophecy has received comparatively little attention in resources dealing with ecological interpretations of the Bible. Surveying volumes 1 and 4 of the *Earth Bible* series, only Fretheim provides a reference to the text (Zeph 1:3) but merely to support his particular focus on Jer 12.²⁶ Staying within the prophetic corpus, other works instead choose to focus on the text of Hos 4:1-3 which conveys a

²¹ Goldingay, "Zephaniah," 100-101.

²² Robertson, *Nahum*, 261; Goldingay, "Zephaniah," 101.

²³ E.g. Exod 7:19; cf. Robertson, *Nahum*, 261.

²⁴ Motyer, "Zephaniah," 912.

²⁵ Given the space constraints, the focus here will be solely on vv. 2-6, while implicitly taking stock of how these verses fit into the larger textual unit of Zeph 1:2-2:3.

²⁶ Volume 1 serves as a general introduction to the series as a whole while, in turn, the focus of vol. 4 is specifically on selected texts from the Psalms and Prophets. Terence E. Fretheim, "The Earth Story in Jeremiah 12," in *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel, EBCS 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

similar (theological) idea to Zeph 1:2-6.²⁷ In the so-called "Exeter project,"²⁸ there are no references to the text as a whole or any verses from it. Finally, Bauckham briefly refers to the Zephaniah text while dealing with Rom 8:18-23, but provides no additional focus on the text itself.²⁹

Given this perceived gap in literature dealing with biblical eco-hermeneutics, the aim of this paper is to present an eco-critical rereading of Zeph 1:2-6. Consequently, to achieve this aim, I will undertake the following steps:

Firstly, as a starting point for this proposed rereading, I use the ecojustice principles of the Earth Bible as an implicit foundation,³⁰ while Habel's "tools for analysis"³¹ contributes to a more critically rounded analysis of the text. In the case of both Habel and the ecojustice principles, the focus is on getting to know the biblical text from an eco-conscious perspective. Secondly, to make sense of certain problems, challenges, and/or assumptions that arise from the first step, I shall move on to the insights that Gustafson's theocentric perspective provides. Finally, to conclude, the aim is to show how such a theocentric reading better suits the contemporary context as opposed to the traditional stewardship approach.

C THE STARTING POINT FOR AN ECO-CRITICAL REREADING

1 The Earth Bible

Few would dispute the importance of the Earth Bible and the influence it has had since its inception (and still has today) on ecological interpretations of the

²⁷ E.g. Melissa T. Loya, "Therefore the Earth Mourns': The Grievance of Earth in Hosea 4:1-3," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).

²⁸ Cf. David G. Horrell, et al., eds., *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010).

²⁹ Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010).

³⁰ The Earth Bible Team, "Guiding Ecojustice Principles," in *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel, EBCS 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

³¹ Norman C. Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008); Norman C. Habel, "Ecological Criticism," in *New Meanings for Ancient Texts: Recent Approaches to Biblical Criticisms and their Applications*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and John Kaltner (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

Bible (and eco-theological reflection in general).³² Therefore, it proves to be the best place to start an eco-conscious, or eco-critical, rereading of Zeph 1:2-6.

The main contribution of the project is its articulation of six "ecojustice principles" that aim to facilitate an interpretive process in which one "asks critical questions to ascertain whether there is justice for Earth in the orientation, ideology, or focus of the text or its interpreters."³³ These principles, in brief, are:³⁴

- (i) The Principle of Intrinsic Worth
- (ii) The Principle of Interconnectedness
- (iii) The Principle of Voice
- (iv) The Principle of Purpose
- (v) The Principle of Mutual Custodianship
- (vi) The Principle of Resistance

Reading Zeph 1:2-6, the principles of Intrinsic Worth, Interconnectedness, Voice, and Mutual Custodianship are the particular ones that come to the fore.

The principle of Intrinsic Worth will come into view at a later stage; for now, I firstly focus on the principle of Interconnectedness. The author of the text, whether consciously or unconsciously, portrays Nature as dependent on humans and human behavior for her survival. Placing such an emphasis on the role of humankind, the text neglects to emphasize that humankind is also dependent on Nature – they are, as it were, "mutually dependent on each other for life and survival."³⁵ In other words, if the actions of humankind threaten the survival of Nature, it will also hold adverse consequences for their own survival. This rings true from both a theological and material perspective in the context of Zephaniah.

Regarding the principle of Voice, it is important to understand that Nature is more than a mere object in the text. Rather, she is a unique character with a distinct "voice" of her own – no one should suppress this voice and it urges humans to listen to her as she speaks.³⁶ An important step to take in this regard is to be more cognizant of the way that the biblical interpreter speaks of and about Nature. As is the case here, one may opt to follow the line of thought that Bauckham refers to as a "cautious degree of anthropomorphism."³⁷ Starting with the use of personal pronouns, the interpreter will focus on learning

³² Cf. Ernst M. Conradie, "Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project," *Scriptura* 85 (2004): 123ff.

³³ Habel, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 2.

³⁴ Cf. Earth Bible Team, "Guiding," 42-53.

³⁵ Cf. Earth Bible Team, "Guiding," 44.

³⁶ Cf. Earth Bible Team, "Guiding," 47-78.

³⁷ Cf. Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 53.

from Nature, consequently allowing her to "speak" through the text.³⁸ In doing so, one recognizes that Nature is a subject in her own right.

Finally, according to the principle of Mutual Custodianship, there exists a partnership or kinship between humans and Nature where the one does not rule over the other.³⁹ This principle is contrary to the Zephaniah text where the author seems to reinforce humankind's lofty position in the hierarchy of Creation. In essence, this concerns the question of the role and place of humans in the created order and the way in which the author portrays this position unfortunately betrays his anthropocentric bias.

2 Habel's tools for analysis

Taking into account the aforementioned ecojustice principles, and using them as an implicit foundation, a more critical analysis of the text is now in order. To do so, the attention turns to Norman Habel's "tools for analysis" – suspicion, identification, and retrieval. From an eco-conscious perspective, these hermeneutical tools encourage "a radical change in posture" to the way the interpreter relates to Nature as a subject, and not an object, in the biblical text.⁴⁰

2a Suspicion

The critical analysis, as Habel points out, starts with "the suspicion that the text is likely to be inherently anthropocentric and/or has traditionally been read from an anthropocentric perspective."⁴¹ This charge of anthropocentrism essentially concerns two things as it relates to the text and the interpreter. Firstly, Habel notes that it establishes a hierarchy where YHWH is at the top, followed by humans, and then Nature. Secondly, it promotes the idea that Nature is nothing other than a mere "object" for humankind to use as it pleases. Consequently, as Habel then points out, this attitude reinforces the idea that humans are superior to Nature – contributing to the gulf that exists between "them" and "us." Similarly to Habel, Van den Brom explains the problem with the anthropocentric viewpoint as follows:

According to the anthropocentric understanding of the universe, the world is designed for the benefit of the human species. The value of stones, plants and animals is dependent upon their contribution to the human well-being. Everything exists solely to do people good. This anthropocentric prejudice determines the reading and interpre-

³⁸ Cf. Earth Bible Team, "Guiding," 47.

³⁹ Cf. Earth Bible Team, "Guiding," 50-51.

⁴⁰ Cf. Habel, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 3.

⁴¹ Habel, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 4.

tation of the biblical texts and their meaning for a religious understanding of the created universe.⁴²

Much of this applies to Zeph 1:2-6. The text assumes a hierarchy that places Nature in a subordinate position to humans. Seemingly not even a character in her own right, she is painted as a passive bystander – a mere spectator in the back-and-forth between YHWH and humans. However, as became clear above, the ecojustice principles of the Earth Bible urge the interpreter to reconsider this position. Alongside (and not subordinate to) humankind, Nature has an important role to play in YHWH's creative plan – a notion that is not foreign to the Zephaniah text or the Hebrew Prophets in general. Therefore, it would be an error to reduce her role to that of a mere "object."

2b Identification

The second facet in the process entails that one identify with Nature as one would normally do, consciously or unconsciously, with other characters in any given biblical text.⁴³ Here, the interpreter moves away from ignorance and denial about Nature's plight, towards awareness and empathy based on the principle of Interconnectedness.⁴⁴ In so doing, one increasingly becomes more mindful of the injustices committed against Nature at the hands of humans (whether directly or indirectly), but also those committed by YHWH.⁴⁵ Habel explains that the aim here is:

...to identify with one or more of the nonhuman characters in the text and locate ourselves in their respective habitats to ascertain what forces or factors we might legitimately claim these characters have experienced.⁴⁶

When the interpreter strives to identify with Nature as the text portrays her, one becomes even more aware of the unfair treatment she receives as an innocent party in the strife between YHWH and humans. Although some (wrongly) perceive her to be the reputed "stumbling block" that needs to be "cut off" alongside "the wicked,"⁴⁷ she is incapable of wrongdoing and deserves no blame. That YHWH also threatens the very existence of the "animals," "birds of the air," and "fish of the sea"⁴⁸ should force humankind to come to a better understanding of their own role in the current predicament.

⁴² Luco van den Brom, "Ecological Hermeneutics," in *Initiation into Theology: The Rich Variety of Theology and Hermeneutics*, ed. Simon Maimela and Adrio König, 6th impression (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2012), 435.

⁴³ Cf. Habel, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 4.

⁴⁴ Cf. Ecojustice Principle 2; Habel, "Ecological Criticism," 49.

⁴⁵ Cf. Habel, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 5.

⁴⁶ Habel, "Ecological Criticism," 50.

⁴⁷ Cf. Zeph 1:3; Roberts, *Nahum*, 170.

⁴⁸ Cf. Zeph 1:3.

Moreover, morally speaking, it should move people to accept responsibility and to correct their own actions accordingly.

2c Retrieval

The final facet concerns the "retrieval" of Nature's voice.⁴⁹ When discussing the ecojustice principle of Voice, it was noted that the aim is to make sure that the interpreter does not silence Nature's voice when working with the biblical text. This also means that one will treat her as a subject in her own right. Of course, saying Nature has a "voice" does not imply that her speech is in any way comparable to the speech of humans (or that the language is somehow the same). The Earth Bible Team explains that this voice, similarly to human body language, "may be physical and a consequence of orientation," as opposed to an auditory phenomenon.⁵⁰

One sometimes finds in the HB that Nature, to some extent, is also intimately in tune with the Deity; the Minor Prophets are no exception. Therefore, whenever something bad is happening or is about to happen, Nature seemingly participates in the process of restoration alongside humans. Familiar examples of this would be the wild animals that "cry [out] to" YHWH in Joel 1, or even the cattle that take part in certain rituals in Jonah 3. In Zeph 1:2–6, the voice of Nature is not as explicit as in these texts, though this does not mean that she is a passive and/or weak character. Rather, one should view her as an important witness with a story to tell.

While the narrative of Zephaniah only picks up here, she has been part of the overall story of YHWH's covenantal people for much longer. She has seen humankind grow, also in their relationship with YHWH, from the covenant with Abraham right through to the covenant at Sinai and beyond. But she has also seen them make decisions that affected themselves, and those around them, in a negative way. She has witnessed them succumb to idolatry, syncretism, and apathy/indifference.⁵¹ Carelessly they even forced her to participate in their religious malpractices, for instance when they "bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens."⁵² As a witness, however, she assumed no moral responsibility for the decisions and actions of her human counterparts.

D ZEPHANIAH 1:2-6 FROM A THEOCENTRIC PERSPECTIVE

Considering the insights of the Earth Bible and subsequent analysis, the relationship between humans and Nature emerges as an important theme for further discussion.

⁴⁹ Cf. Ecojustice Principle 3; Habel, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 5.

⁵⁰ Earth Bible Team, "Guiding," 47.

⁵¹ Zephaniah 1:4b-6.

⁵² Zephaniah 1:5.

In this regard, a few basic observations are in order. Firstly, in this context the term "theocentric" refers specifically to the framework put forth by James Gustafson (briefly outlined below). Secondly, while an exegetical analysis may (rightly) highlight that YHWH is the main character in the text, the focus of an eco-critical rereading necessarily shifts to Nature and the various contributing factors that affect her. On an interrelated note, in using personal pronouns (e.g. "she"/"her") and deliberately focusing on Nature, this rereading does not assume the position of pantheism or wish to explain that the God of Zephaniah was a pantheistic one. Finally, in conducting such a rereading, the focus is not (solely) on the theological underpinnings of the Judeo-Christian faith tradition, but also on the insights that one can garner from science and philosophy.

The traditional (and theologically popular) way of making sense of the human-Nature relationship is to appeal to a model of "stewardship" or "responsible stewardship."⁵³ According to this model, one should not view the position of humankind over Nature from the perspective of dominion and/or despotism, but rather as "a caretaker of what he or she does not own."⁵⁴ Therefore, in a stewardship reading of Zeph 1:2-6, humans as the so-called "crown of creation" have not done their jobs properly. If they were the good caretakers that YHWH expects them to be, then they would not act in a way that affects Nature adversely. As responsible stewards in this context they would adhere to the covenant and reject everything else. They have not done so, however, and therefore they and all of Nature will have to deal with the consequences.⁵⁵

In itself, however, this concept of "stewardship" more often than not tends to venture towards anthropocentrism.⁵⁶ On the one hand, Van den Brom rightly asks who really stands at the center of a stewardship approach, because, as he points out, it is not outrightly evident that humans (will) care for Nature for the sake of Nature herself.⁵⁷ On the other hand, Van Dyk eloquently notes that this responsibility to act on behalf of YHWH as caretakers "does not necessarily imply ruling in an eco-sensitive way."⁵⁸ Finally, the stewardship model stands in contrast to the principle of Mutual Custodianship given that it (direct-

⁵³ Cf. James M. Gustafson, *A Sense of the Divine: The Natural Environment from a Theocentric Perspective* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 92; Peet J. van Dyk, "'Responsible Stewardship' – The Root of all Evil in Eco-Theology?" *OTE* 28/2 (2015): 523-524, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2015/V28N2A16>.

⁵⁴ Gustafson, *Sense of the Divine*, 92.

⁵⁵ Cf. Bennett, "Zephaniah," 676. Taking into account Zeph 2:1-3 it seems such a drastic outcome is still avoidable, but necessarily contingent on the people returning to YHWH.

⁵⁶ Cf. Earth Bible Team, "Guiding," 50-51; Van den Brom, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 440-441; Van Dyk, "Root of all Evil?" 532.

⁵⁷ Van den Brom, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 440.

⁵⁸ Van Dyk, "Root of All Evil?" 524 n. 4.

ly/indirectly) implies that humans are of a different order than the rest of creation.⁵⁹

A more appropriate approach then is the theocentric perspective, especially as articulated by Gustafson:

... human beings participate in the patterns and processes of interdependence of life in the world ... Our participation is a response to events and conditions in which we live; it involves valuing aspects of nature in relation not only to our own interests but also to the "interests" of other aspects of nature.⁶⁰

This approach introduces a difference in nuance as to how one then approaches the biblical text, given that it emphasizes that humans are merely part of the ecosystem alongside Nature and not above her. In other words, it disavows interpretations that elevate the importance of humankind and/or assign them an elite role in the order of Creation. In so doing, it also takes seriously/aims to incorporate the insights provided by the natural sciences.⁶¹ A prominent example of this is the theory of evolution. In this regard, one may carefully consider the words of Leopold noting that humans are only "fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution."⁶² Consequently, the theocentric approach also accords with the ecojustice principles of Interconnectedness and Mutual Custodianship.

Sideris manages to encapsulate all of the above when she writes with reference to the work of Gustafson:

Anthropocentrism constitutes a refusal to accept and respect that a natural ordering that is neither of our own making nor completely under our control... [The] theocentric perspective fosters a sense of dependence, awe, and gratitude [...] for powers that sustain human life and life as a whole. Science supports such a perspective, Gustafson argues, because it reinforces the idea that humans are not the center of these powers and processes.⁶³

In this regard, Gustafson's theocentric perspective broadly corresponds with what one may refer to as an "anthropocosmic" approach.⁶⁴ In contrast to anthropocentrism, following such an approach means that one "locates the

⁵⁹ Cf. Earth Bible Team, "Guiding," 51.

⁶⁰ Gustafson, *Sense of the Divine*, 103.

⁶¹ Cf. Gustafson, *Sense of the Divine*, 99.

⁶² Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac – and Sketches here and there*, paperback ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949 [1968]), 109.

⁶³ Lisa H. Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 201.

⁶⁴ Cf. John Grim and Mary E. Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, FCES (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2014), 56ff.

human within the cosmos and within the community of life on Earth."⁶⁵ Ultimately, it is noteworthy that this view is not alien to the HB. For example, Creation-oriented texts such as Ps 104 and Job 38-41 (at least to some degree) resemble an anthropocosmic perspective.⁶⁶

E CONCLUSION

Drawing on the language of Creation, the Exodus event, and the Sinai Covenant the prophet Zephaniah reprimands his audience, YHWH's covenantal people, about their idolatrous, syncretistic and apathetic/indifferent ways. Utilizing these various traditions the biblical author paints a dramatic picture of a coming destruction – one that will eliminate both humans and Nature. Consequently, following an eco-conscious line of thought, one has to ask: if humankind is at fault, why does the wrath of YHWH also include Nature in this context? While we acknowledge Zephaniah's use of hyperbolic language and the rhetorical intention that undergirds it,⁶⁷ it still raises the question as to how one should understand the relationship between humans and Nature in the order of Creation.

One traditional way of approaching this relationship is to focus on the notion of "(responsible) stewardship." In this approach, the sins of idolatry, syncretism, and apathy/indifference point to a larger issue that is at stake. Overall, humankind's most significant injustice is that they are failing in the commission of Gen 1:28 with respect to their roles here on Earth – they are not being the good "stewards" that YHWH expects them to be.⁶⁸ They also have failed to consider what the consequences of their actions will be for Creation as a whole, and therefore YHWH has to intervene in a tangible way. Birch et al. frame the matter as follows:

The logic seems to be: what God has created, God can remove — all life (Zeph 1:2-3) and even the earth itself (1:18). The created order was established for certain reasons, and if they are being violated, then the world no longer deserves to exist.⁶⁹

This reading, however, is not without its problems. On the one hand, it still succumbs to an anthropocentric point of view. On the other hand, while

⁶⁵ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology*, 177.

⁶⁶ Cf. William P. Brown, "Biblical Accounts of Creation," in *The Old Testament and Ethics: A Book-by-Book Survey*, ed. Joel B. Green and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 167f.

⁶⁷ Cf. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, 124; Redditt, *Introduction*, 310; Tchavdar S. Hadjiev, "The Theological Transformations of Zephaniah's Proclamation of Doom," *ZAW* 126/4 (2014): 513-516. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaw-2014-0031>.

⁶⁸ Cf. Gen. 2:15.

⁶⁹ Bruce C. Birch et al., eds., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 323.

these views may be theologically significant, their appropriation in the contemporary context remains something of a challenge. In this regard, the theocentric approach of Gustafson emerges as a viable alternative. The (main) strength of this approach lies in the fact that it manages to avoid anthropocentrism by emphasizing that humans are merely part of Nature, and not above her in the created order. By making this shift, it accords well with the ecojustice principles of the Earth Bible (and the subsequent developments made by Habel), as well as with the insights that the natural sciences can provide the interpreter (e.g. the theory of evolution).

What then are the most salient differences between the stewardship model and Gustafson's theocentric perspective? How does the theocentric approach better contribute to and facilitate the radical ecological reorientation of the biblical interpreter? To understand the possible differences (and the various implications thereof), one has to consider the possible points of convergence between the two approaches in reading and appropriating Zeph 1:2-6.

Firstly, both approaches proceed from the perspective that humans often have a negative impact on Nature.⁷⁰ Where they diverge from each other, however, is in their respective viewpoints of what said impact entails. Here, as pointed out earlier, the notion of human sin, as ultimate cause, fits well into the stewardship framework. The theocentric approach, however, is more careful in assigning the blame to human sin. That is not to say, though, that such an approach denies that the moral failing of humankind cannot, or will not, have an adverse effect on Nature.⁷¹ Rather, in accordance with a biological paradigm,⁷² a theocentric approach acknowledges that the "struggles" of Nature are fundamentally part of the created order and not necessarily a consequence of human inequity. Humans, however, may have exacerbated some of the perceived struggles that already existed in Nature.

Secondly, both approaches proceed from the perspective that something has to change, ethically speaking, in order to fix the situation that leads to the destruction of Nature. In other words, some form of change in action is in order. For both approaches, the notion of interdependence is of importance here. The main difference, however, is in the implementation of this principle and the specific end-goal in mind. In a stewardship approach that incorporates Zeph 1:2-6, the focus is on the restoration of the "normal" balance – between God and people, between people and Nature, perhaps even between God and

⁷⁰ This is not to suggest that the situation in Zephaniah is the same as that of ecological abuse in the contemporary context. Rather, broadly speaking, the emphasis is on the way(s) that humankind's actions and general attitude, whether consciously or unconsciously, dismantle or lead to the dismantling of Nature.

⁷¹ Cf. Holmes Rolston III, "Does Nature need to be Redeemed?" *Zygon* 29/2 (1994): 225-227; Tim Delaney, "The Five Horrorists," *PhN* 88 (2012): 6-8.

⁷² Cf. Gustafson, *Sense of the Divine*, 103; Rolston, "Does Nature?" 205-206.

Nature. Unfortunately, as Sideris points out, such a reading tends to give humans too much power over Nature:

We are to alter [Nature] in light of a perceived "ecological" objective, which in fact is merely a set of human expectations, and moral preferences, imposed upon the natural world.⁷³

In turn, the theocentric approach advocates relinquishing any sense of control given that a person's life, as a whole, is "subject to constraints and possibilities objective to ourselves."⁷⁴ This approach, therefore, urges humankind to look at themselves and discern the ways in which their actions and/or attitudes influence Nature negatively. However, it also urges us to acknowledge that much of what happens in Nature is outside human control.⁷⁵ Here one moves away from the notion that Nature is "guilty by association" towards a sense of reverence and humility in the face of something greater than oneself.

To conclude, perhaps one can best summarize the above-mentioned ideas in the words of Albert Schweitzer and his amazement at the "riddle of life":

Life means strength, will, arising from the abyss, dissolving into the abyss again. Life is feeling, experience, suffering. If you study life deeply, looking with perceptive eyes into the vast animated chaos of this creation, its profundity will seize you.⁷⁶

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⁷³ Sideris, *Environmental Ethics*, 223.

⁷⁴ Gustafson, *Sense of the Divine*, 101.

⁷⁵ Cf. Gustafson, *Sense of the Divine*, 104.

⁷⁶ Albert Schweitzer, *Essential Writings*, ed. James Brabazon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 141.

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- Mr. C. J. (Neels) Redelinghuys, Ph.D. Candidate (Old Testament Studies), University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. *Email*: neelsred@gmail.com.