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The Earth and the Bible

By K.C. Abraham

It is widely acknowledged that the Bible is the source and authority for our theological and ethical reflections. But there is no unanimity as to the use of the Bible. This issue has now sharpened when we look at it from the perspective of ecology. Earlier there has been a discussion on the thesis of Lynn White who maintained that the roots of environmental crisis could be traced to Christianity, especially the Biblical command to human to have dominion over Earth and all creatures on it.

Our attention is now turned to the problematic use of the Bible and a possible reading of the Bible from the perspective of Earth. I find the book, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, edited by Norman Habel[1], a significant publication. It has brought together mostly Australian scholars to reflect on the question of Biblical hermeneutics from an Earth perspective. This landmark publication should deserve attention of all who are committed to develop ecological ethics from a Christian perspective.

It begins by acknowledging the anthropocentric orientation of the Bible and the problem it poses for an interpretation from the ecological perspective. "We may legitimately suspect the Biblical texts, written by human beings, reflect the primary interests of human beings—their welfare, their human relationship to God and their personal salvation. In short we may suspect that Biblical texts are anthropocentric. As these texts were also written by men, we can expect them to be androcentric, and probably patriarchal".[2] For this reason a reading of the Bible from the perspective of Earth becomes an arduous task. It is further complicated by the fact that even our interpretation of passages that do not have an explicit anthropocentric orientation is influenced by the Western dualistic perceptions of reality. Contrasting pairs characterize the dualistic thinking: human/nature; male/female; heavenly/earthly; reason/matter and so on. These pairings have been understood to have a hierarchical relationship. Human is superior to nature and male superior to female. To see them as complementary we need a change in our perspectives. For this reason it is argued that we need to retrieve the Biblical texts from this distorted reading. For example, the phrase 'heaven and earth' can be read through the western dualistic terms as one opposing the other. But if it is rendered 'sky and land' they are understood as complementary. A new way of reading the text is advocated—reading with Earth. This methodology is influenced by the liberationist and feminist reading of the Bible.

"Liberationists stand with the oppressed poor as they read; feminists stand with oppressed women as they read; we stand with the oppressed Earth in our dialogue with the text. We are concerned with eco-justice: justice for Earth. Our approach therefore can be called eco-justice hermeneutic".[3] It is reading Earth as a subject rather than an object in the text. The important contribution of the book is in its suggestion of six eco-justice principles that guide us in our interpretation of the Bible.

They are:

1. The principle of intrinsic worth: The universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value.
2. The principle of interconnectedness: Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.
3. The principle of voice: Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.
4. The principle of purpose: The universe, Earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.
5. The principle of mutual custodianship: Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners with, rather than rulers over, Earth to sustain its balance and its diverse Earth community.
6. The principle of resistance: Earth and its components not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans, but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.[4]

These principles give us a direction in the new reading of the Bible. The method adopted is similar to that which has been followed in the re-reading of the Bible from the perspectives of women, dalits and other marginal groups. Here the Earth and its interest will provide the interpretive focus. The reader-response approach, which claims “that meaning is a property of the act of reading and is located predominantly in the reader,”[5] plays a key role. ‘Readers engage in meaning production by reflecting upon the text with her/his plural identities, eco-social locations, commitments and subject positions, directed also by the conventions of the time.’

The book gives examples of the study of several passages making use of the guidelines given by the eco-justice principles. Interpretation on one of the key texts, Gen. 1.26-28 is a case in point. Normally it is interpreted as the basis for stewardship—humans as stewards ruling on behalf of God. The image of stewardship comes from the feudal background. God as an absentee landlord put humans in charge of his property. In our interpretation we tend to assume God as ruler, again a feudal legacy, humans as rulers of the Earth. But the principle of custodianship changes the mode of relationship. ‘Custodianship is a mutual partnership. Earth and Earth community have, in spite of the assumed rulership of humanity, been the custodians of human beings. Earth has provided food, shelter, beauty and many other riches to sustain the body and the spirit of humanity. In return humans have assumed these riches as their right rather than the contribution of their partners in the Earth community’.[6]

The important challenge is to read the Bible with the eyes of the subjugated Earth. The meaning of the text is enriched by this perception of eco-justice. Certainly, this requires a new commitment to the Earth and her future. From that commitment we should be prepared to look critically at the text and the Biblical interpretation that is accepted as ‘normative’. What we consider normative is often a culture-bound reading. For this reason the Earth Bible project asks us to make certain commitments before we begin to interpret the text. These commitments are expressed thus: to “acknowledge, before reading the Biblical text, that as Western interpreters we are heirs to a long anthropocentric, patriarchal and androcentric approach to reading the text that has devalued Earth and that continues to influence the way we read the text; to recognize Earth as a subject in the text with which we seek to relate empathetically rather than as a topic to be analysed rationally; to take up the cause of justice for Earth to ascertain whether the Earth and the Earth community are oppressed, silenced or liberated in the Biblical text; to develop techniques of reading the text to discern and retrieve alternative traditions where the voice of the Earth community has been suppressed.”

In the above commitments the use of ‘Earth community’ is important for our perspective, for we are assuming that it is not only the biotic community but also the poor and marginalized who live in solidarity with the Earth. The cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth are inseparable.

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