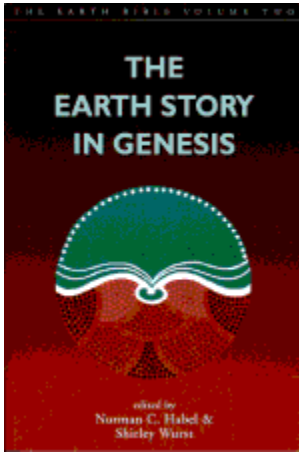


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**Habel, Norman C. and Shirley Wurst, eds.**

***The Earth Story in Genesis***

The Earth Bible 2

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*The Earth Story in Genesis* is the second volume in the Earth Bible series, a collaborative effort of scholars “reading the text from the perspective of Earth” (9). Guiding such a reading are six “ecojustice principles,” enumerated in a table at the beginning of the book (and elaborated in the first volume). These principles espouse the “intrinsic worth” of all elements of the universe; the interconnectedness of all living things; understanding Earth as a character with “voice”; the “purpose,” “dynamic cosmic design” of every element in the universe; the principle of “custodianship” (rather than “rulership”); and the ability of “Earth and its components” to “resist ... in the struggle for justice” (20).

That the book begins with several introductory pieces hints that what follows is an unusual project in biblical studies. In a short foreword, Desmond Tutu pointedly recognizes our present environmental crisis and commends the Earth Bible Team’s work for serious reflection. Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst introduce this particular volume in their editorial preface, and Charles Birch takes the principle of intrinsic worth as the foundation of his prefatory piece, championing a new reading of biblical

texts with this principle as its focus. Following the table of ecojustice principles mentioned above, the book's first article is an introductory one: "Conversations with Gene Tucker and Other Writers," by the Earth Bible Team (21–33). It is itself prefaced by an *apologia* for the book's place in and the importance of an ongoing conversation "about ecojustice as an issue of public concern" (21).

The importance of this first article cannot be overstated because the unorthodox methods of the project and several of its guiding principles will strike many readers as problematic. Indeed, Tucker observes that "[m]ost of us were taught to avoid imposing our preconceptions on the text, or even deciding in advance what we wanted to discover" (22). While he does not advocate working backward from desired conclusions, he does recognize that "principles of interpretation are both essential and inevitable" (22). Consequently, he warns that it is crucial to identify our manner of reading as accurately as possible and to recognize and utilize valuable new models such as feminism.

The book's remaining articles are: "Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1," by Norman Habel (34–48); "Rest for the Earth? Another Look at Genesis 2.1–3," by Howard N. Wallace (49–59); "Common Ground: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 2–3," by Carol A. Newsom (60–72); "Earthing the Human in Genesis 1–3," by Mark G. Brett (73–86); "'Beloved, Come Back to Me': Ground's Theme Song in Genesis 3?" by Shirley Wurst (87–104); "Alienation and 'Emancipation' from the Earth: The Earth Story in Genesis 4," by Gunther Wittenberg (105–16); "Ecojustice: A Study of Genesis 6.11–13," by Anne Gardner (117–30); "Mixed Blessings for Animals: The Contrasts of Genesis 9," by John Olley (130–39); "The Voice of the Earth: An Indigenous Reading of Genesis 9," by Wali Fejo (140–46); "The Earth Story As Presented by the Tower of Babel Narrative," by Ellen van Wolde (147–57); "Chosen People in a Chosen Land: Theology and Ecology in the Story of Israel's Origins," by Gene McAfee (158–74); "The Priestly Promise of the Land: Genesis 17.8 in the Context of P As a Whole," by Suzanne Boorer (175–86); "'For Out of That Well the Flocks Were Watered': Stories of Wells in Genesis," by Laura Hobgood-Oster (187–

99); and “Forgotten Voices of the Earth: The Blessing Subjects in Genesis 49,” by Carole R. Fontaine (200–210).

As is evident from the list of articles, a great deal of the volume concerns the first chapters of Genesis. But as McAfee observes, while “the non-human environment plays a prominent role” in the first part of Genesis, from Gen 12 on it functions more as a “source, backdrop and prize for human sociopolitical conflict” (159). Indeed, because the most explicit associations between human beings and the Earth in the book of Genesis are concentrated in its first chapters (and much of the public discussion of biblical texts and the environmental crisis has focused on those texts), it makes sense that this volume would attend primarily to them.

Similarly, it is not surprising that many contributors to *The Earth Story in Genesis* deal with Gen 1:28. It is instructive that they do so in markedly different ways. Habel reads it in the context of an interruption whereby the creation of human beings “stands in direct conflict with the orientation of the Earth story in the preceding verses” (46). Wallace finds in Gen 2:1–3 “a check against any interpretation of the role of humans in Gen 1:28 that ignores the harmony and wholeness of all the work God has done in creation” (53). Reading an antimonarchical tone in Gen 1:27–28, Brett maintains that while “there is no escaping the overt hierarchy asserted by the text,” it should be read “as a polemical undermining of a role which is otherwise associated primarily with kings” (77). Gardner imagines that the command reflects an attempt to silence “the voice of the earth, in the interests of the supremacy of the God of Israel” (124). Olley reads it in light of Gen 9, which “faces the reality of self-centered human violence” and so imposes “limitations and sanctions” (139). The only one who downplays the problematic terminology of submission and rule is van Wolde, who understands it to be “an expression of reciprocal relationships between the created phenomena” (153).

Although space does not allow for a full treatment here of each article, I found several refreshingly new analyses of Genesis texts in light of the environmental crisis. Habel’s discussion of Gen 1 as “a ‘geophany,’ a manifestation or revelation of Earth,”

and 1:26–30 as a “human story [that] violates the spirit of the Earth-centered story that precedes it” is thought-provoking indeed. Readers of Newsom’s article will appreciate her keen review of Gen 2–3, with its balanced conclusion that the “human fall into anthropocentrism ... is also the story of the birth of moral agency” (72). Fejo’s reading and interpretation of Gen 9 as an Indigenous Australian is not only direct and engaging prose but also rich with down-to-earth sensibility. Finally, noting the many difficulties—historical and literary—that Gen 49 poses, Carole Fontaine directs readers to hear in the chapter “the voice of Earth, mediated through old Canaanite deities and epithets” (200).

While some scholars may have difficulty getting past the methodological issues that Tucker addresses, *The Earth Story in Genesis* offers a valuable invitation to participate in the conversation about biblical texts vis-à-vis the Earth. Our environmental crisis is a real and daunting one that requires a response as complex and multifaceted as the problem itself. *The Earth Story in Genesis* recognizes and responds to the fact that biblical texts, for good or ill, really matter.