# Virtue Ethics, Eco-theology, and Discipleship

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## Summary

Christian discipleship is the practice of following the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, or perhaps more generally as modelling one's life on the teachings of the Triune God. These teachings emerge from the primary sources of theological understanding – scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. For many faith traditions, including my own Lutheran tradition, scripture is the primary source of such wisdom.

Despite strident calls from faith leaders, care for creation in the context of the current ecological crisis is often a minor component of Christian discipleship programs. This is due to both the lack of interpretive techniques for recognizing ecological wisdom throughout scripture and a lack of ecological discipleship resources.

With a view to developing new insights into a Christian response to the current ecological crisis, this thesis presents and applies a new interpretive technique for scripture which allows a broad range of texts to be investigated for their ecological wisdom. Virtue Ethics is investigated as a new interpretive lens for finding ecological wisdom in scripture because it deals explicitly with the ethical actor (in this case, the disciple) and with desirable and undesirable actions (virtues and vices). The traditional cardinal virtues of prudence, courage, justice, and temperance together with the traditional Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love are used for scriptural interpretation. These imply a corresponding set of vices of deficiency and excess, such as the vices of cowardice and foolhardiness associated with the virtue of courage.

Following a conventional exegesis of a text to establish its primary meaning, this eco-virtues methodology first identifies virtues and vices in the text under examination. Then an application step reflects on how these same virtues and vices are exhibited in the current ecological crisis, and how such reflection can encourage care for creation by individuals and communities. Two texts have been chosen for investigation and analysis using this new technique – the NT parable of the Prodigal Son, and the OT prophetic book of Obadiah, and significant new scriptural insights are identified.

These insights are then incorporated into a set of Christian discipleship resources in the form of Bible studies suitable for use by discipleship small groups. To evaluate the potential effectiveness of the Bible studies, they are analysed in terms of their alignment with

previously published characteristics of an effective ecological discipleship program known as the ‘watershed discipleship’ program.  The Bible studies match these criteria well.

The proposed significant original contributions of the project are a new interpretive method for scripture based on virtues and vices, detailed analyses of two biblical texts using the new method, and an analysis of the potential usefulness of this technique for supporting ecological discipleship.

# Declaration

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and

2. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

5th November 2021

## Dedication

This work is dedicated:

with love, to my wife Margit and my daughter Elina for all your support and encouragement; and, in humility, to God who creates, redeems, and sustains us and all creation.

## Acknowledgements

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# Chapter 1 Introduction and Motivation

The current ecological crisis includes problems such as climate change, air and water pollution, deforestation, desertification, and species extinction. If responsible and sustainable stewardship of Earth's resources and protection of its biodiversity are marks of Christian discipleship, then Christians are failing in their duty. This thesis contributes to contemporary eco-theological research by examining possible resources to encourage care for creation.

Examination of humanity's response to the ecological crisis shows that the problems are not primarily caused by a lack of knowledge of the ecological problems or the existence of likely solutions – the scientific consensus on these issues is solid. Instead, the issues are problems of the heart and the will – people in general, including many Christians, appear unwilling to take positive action that conflicts with a comfortable and persuasive socio-economic system that encourages ever-increasing consumption of limited natural resources. Therefore, an important component of eco-theological research should be identifying ways to encourage a transformation of personal and community viewpoints on the importance of creation care – what Pope Francis refers to as an "ecological conversion."[1] This thesis aims to encourage such transformation through ecological discipleship, i.e., Christian discipleship which includes creation care as a fundamental element of a life based on love for God and love for neighbours, including our non-human neighbours.

There are several different sources of theological insight that inform the worldview of Christian disciples, and these include the four common sources of theological understanding: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.[2] In my own Lutheran tradition, scripture is explicitly acknowledged as the pre-eminent source of theological understanding.[3] The Bible is considered not just a collection of dogmatic statements, it is considered the living Word of

[1] Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter, Laudato Si* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015).
[2] Albert C Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (1985): 9.
[3] E.g., from the Lutheran Confessions, The Formula of Concord, article 1: "We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with all teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone."

God, and it is believed that the Holy Spirit is at work through the scriptures to transform its readers into Christian disciples.[4]

This thesis reflects on scripture to encourage and support Christian discipleship in the area of creation care. Such scriptural study, contemplation, and reflection are already key components of Christian education through activities planned to encourage and support Christian discipleship. Such activities include sermons, workshops, personal Bible study programs, community study programs, books, magazines, websites, and podcasts. One important element of Christian education is the practice of guided Bible studies undertaken in Christian discipleship small groups. However, there are few, if any, such Bible study resources explicitly designed for encouraging ecological discipleship, and this will be one focus of this thesis.

In order to develop such Bible study resources, the thesis proposes a novel biblical interpretive method which can bridge the gap between ancient texts (primarily concerned with human nature and with relations between humans and God) and the contemporary problems of the ecological crisis. A key insight here is that many biblical texts are concerned with the morality of the actions of individuals and nations, and that the causes and potential solutions of the current ecological crisis are also determined by the moral choices of contemporary individuals, communities, and nations.

In the field of moral philosophy, there are moral frameworks based on the goodness of the outcomes of actions (teleological frameworks), those based on the correctness of the actions themselves (deontological frameworks), and those based on the goodness of the actor (aretological frameworks).[5] It is this last category, called Virtue Ethics, which will be investigated in this thesis as a link between ancient texts and modern moral problems.

The new eco-virtues technique for the reappropriation of the ancient biblical texts to the modern ecological crisis consists of two steps – a textual analysis step and an application step. In the first step, a particular text is examined to identify the moral virtues and vices that are depicted within the text, paying particular attention to the social and cultural context in which those virtues and vices occur. As a starting point, the traditional cardinal virtues of

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[4] Edward Schroeder, "Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?," in *The Lively Function of the Gospel, Festschrift for Richard R. Caemmerer*, ed. Robert W. Bertram (St. Louis, MI: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 84-86. Online at https://crossings.org/is-there-a-lutheran-hermeneutics/ (accessed 5 May 2021)

[5] There are variations in spelling - *Aretological* frameworks are sometimes written as *areteological* frameworks, both from the Greek word arete ( ἀρετή) meaning excellence or virtue.

wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love are investigated, along with their corresponding vices of deficiency (e.g., cowardice), excess (e.g., foolhardiness) and misdirection (e.g., misplaced hope in human reason). The choice of this set of virtues is explored in section 2.6.5 below.

In the second application step, these biblical virtues and vices are reconsidered in the contemporary context of a particular social issue. In this thesis, the application issue is the ecological crisis. Virtues and vices may be relevant to the causes of the ecological crisis (e.g., greed), the reasons for inadequate current responses (e.g., imprudence and injustice) or they may be relevant to formulating a new course of action necessary to deliver sustainable lifestyles (e.g., temperance). This method uses stories from scripture as a moral mirror to examine our own current lifestyle choices critically as individuals, communities, and nations.

This novel eco-virtues technique will be examined through the analyses of two biblical texts of different genres. The chosen texts are the parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke 15, and the OT prophetic book of Obadiah. The interpretative technique will be evaluated for its usefulness in developing new ecological insights. Reasons for choosing these texts are that they are relatively self-contained passages without being too long for detailed analysis, that they are rich in their discussions of virtues and vices, and that they are not texts which are normally considered for eco-theological analysis.

One practical application of this new interpretive technique will be through the development of ecological discipleship resources, in particular the design of discipleship small group Bible study guides. These studies will firstly introduce the ideas of ecological virtues and vices since these are not common in current Christian discipleship discourse. Then the individual texts will be examined.

It is impractical, if not impossible, to objectively evaluate the effectiveness of such a set of Bible study resources in changing community behaviour concerning creation care. First, such changes are likely to be on a longer timescale than a Master's research program. Also, it would be very difficult to isolate the effects of one short program in the long-term discipleship growth of participants. Instead of evaluating the long-term outcomes from the use of these materials, the potential effectiveness of the study materials will be evaluated in terms of their alignment with previously identified characteristics of an effective ecological

discipleship program. In particular, the materials will be evaluated using Bock's key characteristics of effective implementations of the watershed discipleship program.[6]

Overall, two significant, original contributions to knowledge are made. The first is a new technique for ecological reflection on scripture using virtues and vices as an interpretive key, including its application to two biblical passages. The second contribution is an analysis of the potential effectiveness of Bible studies based on this interpretive method through comparison with the best practice in ecological discipleship programs.

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 examines the relevant background literature, including the ecological crisis, modern scriptural hermeneutical techniques, eco-theology including ecological hermeneutics, environmental ethics – especially environmental virtue ethics, and Christian discipleship including discipleship small groups. Chapter 3 analyses research gaps, formulates research questions, outlines a research methodology, and presents a plan to answer those questions. Ecological reflections on the parable of the Prodigal Son and the book of Obadiah are undertaken in chapters 4 and 5 respectively. Chapter 6 explains the synthesis of new ecological discipleship resources, while chapter 7 analyses their alignment with the best practice in ecological discipleship. Chapter 8 summarises the answers to the original research questions, examines the claimed original contributions, and identifies potential areas for future work.

[6] Cherice Bock, "Watershed Discipleship: Communicating Climate Change within a Christian Framework: A Case Study Analysis," in *Handbook of Climate Change Communication: Vol. 3*, ed. Walter Leal Filho et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018), 167-178. *Watershed Discipleship* is one particular style of effective ecological discipleship program championed by Ched Myers described in more detail in section 2.7.4.

# Chapter 2 Literature Review

This thesis investigates how virtues and vices as they appear in scripture can be used to reflect upon appropriate Christian responses to the ecological crisis. Such reflection can be guided through small group Bible studies designed to foster ecological discipleship. This chapter reviews the literature relevant to this investigation.

Section 2.1 reviews what is meant by the current ecological crisis, while section 2.2 reviews current responses to that crisis by Christian denominational leaders and peak bodies, including Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and Anglican statements. Section 2.3 reviews theological hermeneutics, i.e., the traditions of interpretation of scripture, while section 2.4 describes the most commonly used method of interpretation, viz., Historical-Critical exegesis. Then section 2.5 looks at a range of topics in eco-theology, with some emphasis on ecological interpretations of scripture.

Section 2.6 reviews environmental ethics, a sub-branch of moral philosophy, with a strong focus on the particular ethical framework to be used in this thesis – Virtue Ethics. This section includes an exploration of ecological virtues and vices with an emphasis on those used in eco-theology and suggests a set of virtues and vices to be used later in the thesis.

Section 2.7 defines what is meant by Christian discipleship and ecological discipleship and explains the role of discipleship small groups. This section includes a description of some attributes of the best practice in ecological discipleship which will be used later in the analytical phase of the thesis.

## 2.1 The Ecological Crisis

The earth is currently facing an unprecedented ecological crisis caused by humanity's unsustainable economic models. It is not the intention of this section to provide detailed arguments about the truth or accuracy of different competing claims concerning the seriousness of the crisis or the likelihood of potential future consequences. Instead, this section presents a series of scientific facts and scientifically corroborated predictions provided by international organisations such as the United Nations which indicate the nature and scale of current ecological problems.

Climate change caused by the burning of fossil fuels is perhaps the most urgent of the current ecological issues. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the body within the United Nation for assessing the science around climate change. Climate change is already occurring with an estimated increase in average global temperature of 1.02C compared to pre-industrial times.[7] To mitigate the worst effects of future climate change, it is recommended to keep this temperature increase below 1.5C.[8] This target now been widely adopted as the best-case scenario.

To achieve this 1.5C warming target, $CO_2$ emissions from burning fossil fuels need to be reduced to net-zero by 2050. [9] This 2050 nett zero target has now been widely adopted by different governments, although rarely with a clear plan of how to achieve this reduction.

This nett zero target requires significantly more robust responses from governments and societies to reduce such emissions across domains such as electricity generation, transport, building, and industrial processes. [10]

A second component of the environmental crisis is the pollution of air, oceans, waterways, and land. For example, a United Nations Environmental Report on *the Impact of Pollution on the Marine Environment* identifies nine pollution sources that need to be addressed: "sewage, persistent organic pollutants, radioactive substances, heavy metals, oils, nutrients, sediment mobilization, litter (especially plastics) and physical alteration and destruction of habitat."[11]

In terms of air pollution, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) notes the following facts. 4.3 million deaths are attributed to indoor air pollution from cooking: this is mostly in low and middle-income countries. Over half of the world's population lives in urban areas; while only 12% of cities have air quality measures that meet WHO standards. Ground-level ozone impacts food security by reducing crop yields by up to 50 million tons each year. 3.7 million deaths annually are attributed to outdoor air pollution. The financial costs of environmentally related health risks are in the range of 5%-10% of GDP, with air

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[7] NASA, "Global Climate Change, Vital Signs of the Planet, Global Temperature," accessed 6 May 2021, https://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/global-temperature//.
[8]IPCC, "Global Warming of 1.5 º C," 2018, accessed 14 June 2021, https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/. 178.
[9]IPCC, "Global Warming of 1.5 º C." 12.
[10]IPCC, "Global Warming of 1.5 º C." 15.
[11] Mette Wilkie, "Impact of Pollution on the Marine Environment ", United Nations Environment Program, 2017, accessed 20 August 2018, https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/21771/pollution-marine-environment.pdf. 1-10.

pollution taking the highest toll.[12] Reducing air pollution requires action on pollution from cooking, heating, lighting, vehicles, energy production, waste burning and many other sources.[13]

A third area of major concern is species extinction and consequent reduction in biodiversity. *The Global Biodiversity Outlook 5 (GBO-5)* is published by the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and notes a grim future outlook if no action is taken.[14] The report suggests a substantial portfolio of actions that are needed to meet its 2050 targets, including protecting habitats, limiting global warning, reducing pollution, managing invasive species, and reducing environmental pressure from food production and industrial processes.[15]

Overall, the scientific consensus is that more needs to be done to address these interlinked drivers of the environmental crisis. Organisations such as the UNEP and corresponding agencies in many countries are sending clear messages that urgent action is required. To date, the social and political will to make the substantial and dramatic changes to the current globalised economic systems has been lacking, and this is only likely to change when a majority of citizens actively decide to live more sustainably. Societal, economic, and political changes will reflect the cumulative choices and actions of citizens and Christian churches are one place in which choices and values are shaped. This thesis looks at the role of the church in achieving this change of heart of individual citizens and of the community as a whole.

## 2.2 The Christian Leadership Response to the Environmental Crisis

Many Christian leaders have been publicly calling for urgent action on the environmental crisis. This section summarises some key statements by faith leaders.

### 2.2.1 Laudato Si

The 2015 papal encyclical, *Laudato Si*, (Praise be to You) is a powerful call to ecological action, and a useful summary of current, progressive, mainstream Christian theological

[12] United Nations Environment Program, "Clearing the Air: Combatting Air Pollution," 2012, accessed 20 August 2021, https://www.unep.org/resources/infographic/clearing-air-combatting-air-pollution.
[13] United Nations Environment Program, "Clearing the Air: Combatting Air Pollution."
[14] Convention on Biological Diversity, "Global Biodiversity Outlook 5," 2020, accessed 27 July 2021, https://www.cbd.int/gbo5. 18.
[15] Convention on Biological Diversity, "Global Biodiversity Outlook 5." 18.

reflection on the current ecological crisis.[16] It is an excellent example of current ecological calls for action by Church leaders, and so is considered in some detail here. This encyclical is not just addressed to the Roman Catholic church and its members, but to all churches and indeed to all people. The key issues in this encyclical provide a useful summary of a considered Christian response to the ecological crisis.

- Damage to God's creation through climate change, pollution, and loss of biodiversity is real, ongoing, and needs to be urgently addressed globally by all. (13-14)[17]
- Damage to the environment is a reflection of our sinful nature, and this requires acknowledgement and repentance. Technology will not solve the ecological crisis since the problem is fundamentally one of human nature. Changes in behaviour require radical changes in our attitude to creation. (101-116)
- The Church should be a powerful voice and an active participant in the worldwide ecological movement. (209-221)
- Global ecological damage has the greatest impact on the poor and marginalised in the world, and this damage is a reflection of human greed and indifference. (48-52))
- Global responses to the ecological crisis, both within the Church and in the wider community, have generally been slow, weak, and ineffectual. There are examples of significant positive responses, but these are too few and too scattered. (53-59)
- Creation, as a reflection of the Creator, has intrinsic value, not just instrumental value in supporting human progress. (140)
- Care for the environment should be considered as one part of an integral ecology that acknowledges the interrelatedness of environmental, economic, social, and cultural life. (147-155)
- Solutions are likely to lie in local, national, and international dialogue, broadly-based ecological education, and development of a spirituality that acknowledges and nurtures our responsibilities to creation and to each other. Solutions require a change in our hearts and our attitudes. (164-201)
- In God, all things are possible, and the current ecological crisis needs to be addressed in a spirit of joy and peace and grace and hope. (222-227)

[16] Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter, Laudato Si*.
[17] Numbers at the end of each paragraph are the sections of *Laudato Si* where these points are made.

*Laudato Si* refers to some biblical texts to emphasise its points, particularly in paragraphs 94-100, but a scriptural basis for the above points is not the focus of the document. The major points of the document are to affirm that damage to creation is real, that human nature and behaviour are responsible for this damage, and to suggest actions for changing those behaviours that have led to this damage. In 2021, marking five years since the publication of *Laudato Si*, the *Vatican Dicastery for Promotion of Integral Human Development* has launched a new program and a public commitment for Catholic institutions to begin a 7-year journey to total sustainability in the spirit of *Laudato Si*.[18]

### 2.2.2 Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

The Eastern Orthodox Church has also been outspoken in its call for creation care as opposed to a greedy and unsustainable modern lifestyle. The following excerpt from a 2010 speech by Patriarch Bartholomew gives an insight into his support of creation care.

> In our efforts, then, to contain global warming, we are admitting just how prepared we are to sacrifice some of our greedy lifestyles. When will we learn to say: "Enough!"? When will we direct our focus away from what we want to what the world needs? When will we understand how important it is to leave as light a footprint as possible on this planet for the sake of future generations? We must choose to care. Otherwise, we do not really care at all.
>
> We are all in this together. Indeed, the natural environment unites us in ways that transcend doctrinal differences. We may differ in our conception of the planet's origin, whether biblical or scientific. But we all agree on the necessity to protect its natural resources, which are neither limitless nor negotiable.
>
> It is not too late to respond – as a people and as a planet. We could steer the earth toward our children's future. Yet we can no longer afford to wait; we can no longer afford not to act. People of faith must assume leadership in this effort; citizens of the world must clearly express their opinion and political leaders must act accordingly. Deadlines can no longer be postponed; indecision and inaction are not options.

[18] Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, "The Launch of the Laudato Si' Action Platform," 2021, accessed 24 June 2021, https://www.humandevelopment.va/en/news/2021/the-launch-of-the-laudato-si-action-platform.html.

> We are optimistic about turning the tide; quite simply because we are optimistic about humanity's potential. Let us not simply respond in principle; let us respond in practice. Let us listen to one another; let us work together; let us offer the earth an opportunity to heal so that it will continue to nurture us.[19]

This statement emphasises that greedy human lifestyle choices are a primary cause of the environmental crisis, and therefore changes in lifestyle choices will be needed to respond to the crisis. The statement also reinforces that the problem requires actions at different levels – changes are needed both at the individual level, but also at the political level, and people of faith need to actively lead change at both levels.

### 2.2.3 Other Faith Statements

Following are a few excerpts from other denominational statements.

From Lutheran World Federation, as introduction to the 2020 Season of Creation by the Program Executive in the LWF Department for Theology, Mission and Justice:

> Data confirms that if we do not change our economies and lifestyles of consumption, the effects of climate change will be disastrous, beginning with the most vulnerable. Climate change will cause planetary systems to fail, economies and food systems to break down, leading to more loss and damages, greater climate migration, and increased conflict over resources. If we want to avoid that disruption of society, then we need to care for the integrity of creation.[20]

This statement explains to Lutheran congregations considering celebrating the Season of Creation why such a celebration is important as a season both of prayer and of action.[21] It explains several key aspects of creation care in terms of Lutheran theology. Creation care is framed as a gospel-focussed response to God's grace rather than a law-oriented obligation. This passage also frames creation care as a rightful part of Christian love for neighbours, in this case non-human neighbours, and it reinforces that action is not just needed at a personal

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[19] Patriarch Bartholomew, "Religion and the Environment the Link between Survival and Salvation, ," 1997, accessed 31 May 2021, https://www.apostolicpilgrimage.org/the-environment.
[20] Chad Rimmer, "Caring for the Integrity of Creation," 2020, accessed 14 June 2021, https://www.lutheranworld.org/blog/caring-integrity-creation.
[21] The Season of Creation is a widespread, but not universal, component of the yearly Christian calendar, celebrated between 1st September and 4th October to focus on care for creation. For more information, see World Council of Churches, "Season of Creation," 2021, accessed 14 June 2021, https://www.oikoumene.org/node/6282.

level but at a societal level. This statement shows that the promotion of creation care can be framed as an integral part of existing theological frameworks.

The Program Director for the Environment and Sustainable Communities within the worldwide Anglican Communion writes the following in 2016.

> It is obvious that the years ahead will be tumultuous and difficult. If all goes well, historians will look back and say that we, as the church, came together and responded as true people of faith. The climate crisis is, in fact, a colossal and urgent moral issue – and a survival issue. ... The good news is that we already know how to do much of what needs to be done -- and about what we don't know, Jesus will show us the way. [22]

Like the previous statements, this message emphasises that Christians have a particular role to play in creation care, not just as good citizens but also as faithful Christians. Action is needed individually, as part of the Church, and more broadly in cooperation with the rest of society.

Evangelical churches, often more socially conservative, also now have strong voices calling for urgent changes in behaviour to address the environmental crisis. A statement from the Evangelical Environmental Network declares: " Thus, the task of creation-care is part of loving one's neighbour, loving what God loves, and therefore loving God."[23] This statement motivates creation care by reflecting on themes of evangelical theology, such as God's providence and human creativity and intelligence, and frames the ecological crisis as a conflict that requires resolution. Care for creation is seen as fulfilling love for our neighbours and love for God.

There are many more such statements that could be quoted, but these examples should serve to show that creation care is a clear aspiration of contemporary church leadership. The challenge is to translate these leadership calls into action at congregational and individual levels.

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[22] Jeff Golliher, "The Climate Crisis: The Anglican Communion, the United Nations, the World," 2016, accessed 14 June 2021, https://acen.anglicancommunion.org/media/236537/Paper-for-ACC16-Jeff-Golliher.pdf. 5-6.

[23] Evangelical Environmental Network, "Beliefs," 2021, accessed 14 June 2021, https://creationcare.org/who-we-are/beliefs.html.

### 2.2.4 Multi-Faith Statements

Care for the earth is a common concern among all major faiths, as well as among government and inter-governmental agencies, such as the United Nations. In October 2020 an updated version of an earlier book on faith and the earth was republished by the UNEP and the World Parliament of Religions: *Faith for Earth: A Call for Action*.[24]

This report brings together perspectives from a broad range of different religions. It emphasises the urgency of action as well as declaring that action is a matter of courage and willingness to change.

> We are in a race against time that will require political will, innovation, inclusion, tolerance, values and ethics, financing, and partnerships. We are calling on everyone—countries, cities, the private sector, individuals, and faith-based organizations—to strengthen their actions to mitigate climate change, restore ecosystems, and protect the health of the planet without delay. The world has the scientific understanding, the technological capacity, and the financial means to do this. We need to trust our abilities and act accordingly.[25]

This indicates that international groups such as the UNEP are looking to faith groups, among others, to be part of the solution to the growing ecological crisis.

In summary, the scientific evidence and the global faith leaders all agree that urgent action is needed, but they also identify that this action requires changes in priorities and attitudes. This thesis aims to provide resources that can help this change of heart and mind.

## 2.3 Theological Hermeneutics

Since this thesis will be based around ecological readings of scripture, it is useful first to survey the history and current research directions in reading and understanding scripture, i.e., theological hermeneutics, before examining ways to read scripture with ecological eyes.

Epistemology is the philosophical study of how humans acquire knowledge about the world around them. Hermeneutics is a subset of this area, which looks specifically at how humans acquire knowledge by interpreting texts. Theological hermeneutics particularly looks at how

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[24] UN Environment Program and Parliament of the World's Religions, "Faith for Earth: A Call for Action," UNEP, 2020, accessed 6 May 2021, https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/33991/FECA.pdf.
[25] UN Environment Program and Parliament of the World's Religions, "Faith for Earth: A Call for Action." 6.

Christians make contemporary meaning through reading and interpreting ancient scripture. There is a long history of theological hermeneutics which obviously has significance for this thesis.

This section presents a summary of the history of theological hermeneutics, and it is based on Alexander Jensen's work in categorising different themes in this area.[26] Jensen starts with a simple definition, quoting the literary theorist Hans-Georg Gadamer: "the simple meaning is that hermeneutics is the 'art of *hermeneuein*, i.e. of proclaiming, translating, explaining and interpreting', or, in short, the 'art of understanding'".[27] However, Jensen then refines his discussion to the key issues in hermeneutics, which he defines as "the identification, analysis and removal of obstacles to understanding." [28]

The foundation of Jensen's exploration of hermeneutics is the idea that there is an internal cognitive process that is replicated in an external text, an idea investigated as early as Aristotle. Augustine of Hippo provided the most significant insight into this division of what he called the *inner word* (*logos endiathetos*) and the *external word* (*logos prophorikos*), by noting that there is an inevitable loss between these two so that the text never fully matches the internal thought. Much of hermeneutical theory deals with how this loss is modelled and accommodated.

For scripture, this inner word is the Word of God or the will and mind of God, and the external word is scripture. If hermeneutics is the art of textual interpretation, then theological hermeneutics is the investigation of what we can understand of God's message to humanity as revealed by scripture. Such an investigation brings key theological fundamentals to the forefront such as the authority of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

For some texts, a plain-sense, literal meaning is uncontroversial. However, in other cases, the literal meaning may seem meaningless, contradictory, or inconsistent with the reader's understanding of the world. This is a significant issue when the text is an authoritative text, such as the Bible. In such cases, allegorical readings present a solution, where the text may literally say one thing, but its real meaning is quite different. Jensen gives the example of the

[26] Alexander Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics* (Norwich, UK: SCM Press, 2007).
[27] Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 2.
[28] Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 2.

battles of the gods in the authoritative Hellenic text of the *Illiad* being considered to be an allegorical description of the ongoing battle between good and evil.[29]

Typological interpretations are a type of allegorical interpretation that links Old Testament (OT) passages to the New Testament (NT). Patterns or *types* in the OT are read as pre-configurations of the same patterns in the NT. Such typological interpretation appears directly in some parts of the NT. For example, in Isaiah 61, the prophet declares "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Is 61:1-2) In Luke 4, preaching in Nazareth, Jesus reads this text and then says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4: 21). Just as the prophet in Isaiah proclaimed good news, so Jesus now proclaims good news to the poor.

The early Christian church saw the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the subsequent establishment of the church as the fulfilment of the OT prophecies about God's restoration of God's people. The literal meaning of the OT writings did not always point to Jesus Christ and the Church, so instead, they were interpreted allegorically and typologically to make this connection.

Allegorical and typological interpretations of scripture became standard during the Middle Ages. The standard exegetical practice involved determining the fourfold meanings of each passage of scripture. In addition to the one literal sense of scripture, medieval readers looked for three non-literal senses – the narrow allegorical sense[30] about beliefs, doctrines, and dogma; the moral sense about how to live the Christian life, and the anagogical sense about the world to come. The correctness of the non-literal senses was determined by whether the interpretation fitted with the traditional understandings of the Church.

In the Middle Ages, typological interpretation was the predominant form of interpretation for the entire OT.[31] Rather than seeing the OT as describing the story and history of the Jewish people, the OT was interpreted as a set of stories that pre-figured the stories of the NT. An

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[29] Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 11.
[30] The narrow allegorical sense is about beliefs, doctrines, and dogmas. Elsewhere in this section allegorical is used in the broader sense which includes the narrow allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses, as well as typological readings.
[31] David L Baker, "Typology and the Christian Use of the Old Testament," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 29, no. 2 (1976): 141.

example would be that Noah's Ark which provided salvation for humanity typifies the NT church, outside which there is no salvation.[32] David Baker distinguishes between fanciful allegorical interpretations and typological interpretations which imply real correspondence between OT and NT events.[33]

Reformers such as Martin Luther and Jean Calvin believed that these allegorical and typological interpretations misrepresented the original intended meaning of the OT texts, and they insisted on the primary meaning of scripture as being the "plain sense" meaning of the text.[34] They believed that this plain sense meaning of scripture was available to all readers of scripture, not just to clergy, leading to vernacular translations such as Luther's German Bible.

There are some passages of scripture that resist straightforward literal interpretations, so reformation writers allowed a "prophetic" literal sense, which assumed that certain OT texts, particularly the Psalms and prophets actually referred to Christ, even if this was not evident in a straightforward literal sense.[35]

The reformers did not believe that readers were free to determine their own idiosyncratic readings of scripture, but rather that this was a communal activity of the whole Church, so summaries of theological doctrines were published, such as *Luther's Small Catechism*, and these were, and still are, studied in detail as preparation for confirmation.[36] Such doctrinal summaries acted as a type of hermeneutical key for biblical interpretation. As such, the reformers reinforced the notion of the 'hermeneutical circle'.[37] . Books like Luther's Small Catechism provide a useful entry point into this circle.

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[32] Frederick Fyvie Bruce, "The Critical Study of Biblical Literature - Allegorical Interpretation," in *The New Encyclopedia Brittanica* (2018). https://www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-literature/Moral-interpretation#ref73500. Other examples include Isaac carrying the wood for his sacrifice as a type for Jesus carrying his cross.

[33] Baker, "Typology and the Christian Use of the Old Testament," 153.

[34] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, vol. 6 (St Louis, MI: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 150-151. "He who either fabricates allegories without discrimination or follows such as are fabricated by others is not only deceived but also most seriously harmed, … Hence allegories either must be avoided entirely or must be attempted with the utmost discrimination and brought into harmony with the rule in use by the apostles . … Yet these remarks must not be understood to mean that we condemn all allegories indiscriminately, for we observe that both Christ and the apostles occasionally employ them.".

[35] Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 65-66.

[36] Martin Luther, *Luther's Little Instruction Book: The Small Catechism of Martin Luther* (Online: Project Gutenberg, 1999), Accessed 29 July 2021. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1670.

[37] The hermeneutical circle is the idea that, in the case of a complex text such as the Bible, one needs to understand the overall meaning of the whole Bible in order to best understand the individual parts of the Bible, and also that study of these individual parts leads to greater understanding of the whole. Understanding

The next significant shift in biblical hermeneutics occurred with the Enlightenment, starting in the 17th century. Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Benedict de Spinoza believed that the highest authority was rational thought.[38] Human reason was considered such a powerful source of truth that they believed all meaningful statements could be derived directly by reason. Any statements that could not be verified by reason were deemed to be suspect, and this included most of the narrative, prophetic and theological content of scripture. Even today, much of the secular criticism of the truth or value of scripture can be traced back to these Enlightenment ideas. The response of the church was to re-assert the authority of scripture. It was at this time that theology and philosophy developed into separate academic disciplines with limited overlap.

Another influential philosophical movement was Scottish common-sense philosophy, led by philosophers such as Thomas Reid.[39] The major idea of this movement is that the world is perceived directly through our senses, and our knowledge is not mediated by other mental processes – which is sometimes called naïve realism. Most of the previous philosophical bases of epistemology were rejected as unnecessary complications. In terms of theological hermeneutics, common-sense philosophy proposes that the Bible simply means what it says. If it says creation was in six 24-hour days, then that is exactly what it means. To justify texts that are inconsistent with our understanding of the world, it was necessary to devise the doctrine of the inerrancy of scripture, i.e., Scripture is not just the revealed word of God, things happened exactly as literally described in the text. Such a philosophy led to the modern fundamentalist theological movement, which assumes that scripture is clear and obvious to all and does not need the mediation of a history of interpretation. Such a hermeneutical approach is ill-equipped to deal with ambiguities, contradictions, and metaphors and it ignores the inevitable social and cultural biases of the interpreter.

German pietist theologians such as August Hermann Francke proposed an alternative hermeneutical method, in which the most significant layer of meaning was the mood or affect

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switches between consideration of the whole and the parts, and it is not a linear process. One issue is where to start this inductive analysis, and a theological summary, such as a catechism, can provide such an entry point.

[38] Immanuel Kant, "The Conflict of the Faculties," in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. A. Wood and G. Di Giovanni (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 264.
Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Jonathan Israel and Michael Silverthorne, ed. Jonathan Israel (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 131; Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal, *Spinoza's 'Theological-Political Treatise' a Critical Guide* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[39] Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 16-17.

induced in the reader by the text.[40] Pietists saw biblical interpretation as producing a religious experience in the reader. The text had meaning at a spiritual and emotional level, not just at a rational level.

Friedrich Schleiermacher clarified the understanding of what hermeneutics involved, starting with a pre-verbal understanding of a thought in the mind of the author, converted into words so that the thought could be uttered, heard by the listener or reader, and then translated into an internal understanding.[41] At each stage, there are opportunities for ambiguity and misunderstanding. The conversion from thought to utterance depends on the structure and nature of language in the author's original context, and the understanding is mediated by the reader's social context. He believed that misunderstanding was common and correct understanding the exception, and so every act of interpretation required awareness of hermeneutical difficulties.

Jensen rates Schleiermacher as

> arguably the most important theologian of the nineteenth century; his work has influenced all subsequent theology, either in being embraced or rejected. His main work, *The Christian Faith*, is one of the greatest theological works, together with Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and possibly Karl Barth's Church *Dogmatics.*[42]

Schleiermacher was undoubtedly a very influential theologian and philosopher, and it is important to look in some detail at his novel insights. Schleiermacher extends the idea of the hermeneutical circle. This circle is no longer just the concept that the parts of the text depend on the whole, and the whole on the parts, but rather that the text itself needs to be seen in the context of many factors needed for understanding, such as the social and historical context in which the text was written, and indeed the whole history of texts. Understanding is never complete, but it is a continual process of refinement and improvement. Consistent with his pietist background, he believed that the primary aim of a text is to convey an insight or feeling and, in the case of scripture, this feeling is the Christian faith. The ability of the text

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[40] August Hermann Francke, *A Guide to the Reading and Study of the Holy Scriptures*, trans. William Jaques (Philadelphia, PA: David Hogan, 1823), 125-131. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=dul1.ark:/13960/t2795zp6z.
[41] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 3rd ed., ed. Paul T. Nimmo (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 591-611. http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/the-christian-faith/.
[42] Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 90.

to convey this faith does not depend on the historical accuracy of facts in the text, and understanding can make use of metaphor and allegory in conveying this faith. Schleiermacher provided the broad parameters for theological hermeneutics for all those who followed after him.

Subsequently, there was significant interest in historicism, i.e., in considering biblical texts in the social and historical contexts in which they were written. Wilhelm Dilthey, for example, sought to use ancient texts to build up an objective history of human thought, treating history as a fundamental objective science.[43] Hermann Gunkel, part of the German History of Religion school around 1900, treated scripture as a way to understand the development of religious thought over time.[44] Such writers treated scripture purely as historical documents, not as sacred texts that still had something to say to us today.

The understanding of texts has also been highly influenced by the so-called "masters of suspicion" – Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud.[45] Marx sought to understand the oppression of humanity by recognizing the control of the means of production by the ruling class. Legal systems, social structures and religion are all used as tools to reinforce the power of the ruling class, and so religious texts should be understood in terms of their role in maintaining existing power structures.[46] Nietzsche believed that human behaviour is driven by relationships of power, either domination or servitude. Such relationships are implicit in texts. In particular, he believed that the Bible was written from the perspective of the dominated to comfort them in their servitude, and the text has no special value other than uncovering these power relationships.[47] For Freud, most of our actions are controlled by our subconscious, and such actions are often irrational.[48] Our rational minds seek to explain these actions through a process of rationalisation. The same applies to texts which typically point to unacknowledged unconscious and irrational thoughts

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[43] Wilhelm Dilthey, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works, Volume IV: Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, ed. A. Makkreel Rudolf and Rodi Frithjof (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 229-234. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691188706.
[44] Hermann Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, trans. K. William Whitney Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans 2006).
[45] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 33.
[46] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N.I. Stone (Chicago, IL: Kerr & Co., 1904), 9-14. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/46423.
[47] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, 2nd ed., ed. Maudemarie Clark, Brian Leiter, and R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 49-50.
[48] Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York, NY: WW Norton 1977).

appearing as seemingly rational arguments. Freud described religion psychoanalytically as an illusion, or more harshly as a society-wide obsessional neurosis. All three of these thinkers believed not just that a text is influenced by the social and historical context of the author, but rather that the text is so influenced by such contexts or by the writer's unconscious that the texts cannot be taken at face value. None of them held that the Christian Bible is a revelation about a transcendent God, but rather the product of a distorted human understanding of reality. Eventually, these writers' ideas, particularly those of Marx, would influence later liberation theology readings of scripture.

The early twentieth century saw the emergence of existentialism as a key philosophical school, beginning with the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Rather than considering understanding as something that emerges from the examination of the external world, Heidegger's philosophy considers understanding as the core of being.[49] It is only meaningful for language to speak about that which we already have some understanding. The goal of hermeneutics is to uncover our existing understanding of the world. Heidegger uses the Greek term *aletheia* for truth, where *aletheia* means an uncovering or a revealing of the true nature of something in the world. Texts depend on the state-of-mind of the author, i.e., on the author's inherent understanding of the world, and the act of interpreting texts enables our own understanding of the world to be brought to the conscious and contemplated.

Rudolf Bultmann extends Heidegger's existential philosophy into the realm of theology and theological hermeneutics.[50] Biblical texts are then interpreted in terms of how our understanding of ourselves is changed. Human existence can be changed, for example, to a life in faith from a life without faith through God's incarnation in the proclamation of God's word. He argues that the ancient texts contain the record of the fundamental change in understanding of the original authors through encounters with God within their historical and social contexts. For Bultmann, the texts have the same power to change the reader's understanding of the world in their modern context.

Hans-Georg Gadamer expands Heidegger's notion of language as uncovering our understanding of the world.[51] In particular, he believes that understanding is an act of

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[49] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010).
[50] Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984).
[51] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weisheimern and Donald G. Marshall (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2013).

interpretation, converting the words of a text into an inner understanding of the text, which then affects our understanding of our being. Through interpretation of language, humans grow their understanding of the set of meaningful relations that constitute our world. Since language and texts are shaped by culture and society, so our understanding of the world is shaped by these same forces. When a reader approaches an ancient text such as the Bible, the reader comes with modern assumptions about culture, society, and the nature of their own being, and so there is effectively a dialogue between reader and text to come to a new understanding. The reader typically comes with questions and seeks answers from the text.

Paul Ricoeur, using insights from the earlier mentioned "masters of suspicion", believed that texts contain a surplus of meaning beyond what may have been intended by the original author.[52] The text implicitly includes information about the social, historical, and political context of the author, as well as their unconscious state-of-mind. So, a text or discourse reveals both the author's intended meaning and contextual information about the author. Critical interpretation of the text is essential. Ricoeur believed that metaphor is a particularly important method for understanding since it explains new ideas using existing understandings of the world. Since each reader brings a different context to a text, each can understand the text differently.

Gerhard Ebeling promoted an existentialist understanding of scripture, explaining that understanding is not primarily understanding of language, but rather understanding through language.[53] The aim is not to establish an objective, unbiased meaning for the text, but rather to use the text to better understand the web of relationships that constitute our being, in particular our relationship to God.

A different school of hermeneutical investigation is structuralism. Here the focus is on the structure of the language of a text. Language consists of signs or symbols which are arranged to make meaning. Structuralist interpretation looks at the signs and symbols in the text, and the goal is to identify deep structure in the text, i.e., deep meanings for the symbols represented by language. While Ferdinand de Saussure applied structuralism to texts, the

[52] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).
[53] Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (London, UK: SCM, 1963).

same techniques were applied in fields such as mythology (Claude Levi Strauss), psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan) and theology (Vladimir Propp).[54]

Poststructuralism, such as in the work of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, extends this concept of signifier and signified, so that every signified object is itself a signifier to other signs, in an endless web of meaning.[55] The author is simply an assembler of signs, and meaning is only established when the reader "plays" the text through interpretation. The world becomes an interrelated web of texts, each pointing to others, and there is no fundamental meaning. Deconstructionism, as exemplified by Jacques Derrida, similarly shows that deep analysis of texts exposes them as oppressive in seeking to establish and maintain binary oppositions.[56] When these oppressive oppositions are identified and examined, the underlying meaninglessness of the text is evident and nonconventional readings are opened. Every reading is equally valid.

Jensen identifies two potential weaknesses of poststructuralist and deconstructionist interpretations of scripture.[57] First, if the reader is the co-creator of the meaning of the text through the act of reading, then meaning is largely restricted to what the reader already knows. This is at odds with the Christian notion that the Word of God is transcendent and revelatory, i.e., it brings transformations in understanding that are beyond human reason. Second, these techniques lead to the notion that texts lead to other texts, and there is never a link from text to the concrete world, which limits their ability to extend understanding of the world outside the text.

Karl Barth's hermeneutics are based on his dialectical theology where God is absolutely transcendent and separated from creation, so it is not possible for the Word of God to be contained within scripture.[58] Instead, the Bible provides a space where the Word of God is hidden behind the text, and the work of interpretation is to use the text to open a space where the Word of God is revealed directly to the reader. Humans, including biblical writers,

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[54] Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 161-166.
[55] Roland Barthes and Richard Howard, "Lecture: In Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège De France, January 7, 1977," *Oxford Literary Review* 4, no. 1 (1979).
Michel Foucault, *The Discourse on Language in the Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Rupert Sawyer (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1972).
[56] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatari Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2016).
[57] Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 174.
[58] Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Church Dogmatics Volume 1*, trans. G.T. Thompson and Harold Knight (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2004).

cannot meaningfully speak of God; instead, their writing is a response in faith to the direct self-revelation of God. For Barth, the church is only church when it accepts the authority of the Bible, and Barth excluded significant interaction between theology and other disciplines.

By contrast, many recent hermeneutical theories have looked at innovations in areas such as literary studies, sociology, politics, and critical theory to investigate how these analytical techniques can be applied to the analysis of scripture. These techniques are often useful in providing additional insights into scriptural texts, rather than providing a complete hermeneutical technique.

Literary criticism looks at the narrative and rhetorical structure of the text as written.[59] Critical theory looks at how the politics of power and oppression distort the meaning of texts.[60] Feminist hermeneutics investigates distortions in scripture from the power relationships associated with gender.[61] Postcolonial hermeneutics looks at how imperial power, and particularly the perceived superiority of western civilization, distorts the interpretation of scripture.[62] Ecological hermeneutics, as described in a subsequent section, looks at how anthropocentric readings of scripture have distorted theological understanding.

Interpretation of scripture inevitably draws on the reader's psychological, social, historical, and denominational context. Any mature hermeneutical investigation needs to push past the naïve realist view that scripture is a clear and objective account of inerrant historical facts. The goal of critical hermeneutics is not to undertake an interpretation free of subjective influences, but rather to acknowledge these influences explicitly and consciously.

Jensen concludes his summary of theological hermeneutics by describing three fundamental theological decisions that influence interpretation.[63] The first decision is about the fundamental reference of theological understanding, which could be the historical events behind the text, or it may be an encounter with the divine that is opened up through the text or the church could be the authority as expressed in denominational creeds and catechisms. Jensen's second decision is how God's revelation through Jesus Christ is mediated. Is it

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[59] Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990).
[60] Jürgen Habermas, "On Hermeneutics' Claim to Universality," in *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique*, ed. Josef Bleicher (London, UK: Routledge, 1980).
[61] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Bloomsbury 2015).
[62] Fernando F Segovia and Stephen D Moore, *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2005).
[63] Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 209.

mediated by historical events, is it by the word of God in scripture, is it by direct revelation, or by other means? Lastly, Jensen believes that the theologian must decide on the relationship between inner understanding, in both the writer and the reader, and the written external word of scripture.

This section has reviewed the history and development of hermeneutics, especially theological hermeneutics since this thesis explores how reflection on scripture can increase understanding of the causes of the ecological crisis and motivate appropriate responses to that crisis. Such an exploration of understanding needs to be aware of the breadth of key scholarship in this area. The next section explores the most popular current exegetical technique for biblical interpretation in more detail.

## 2.4 Historical-Critical Exegesis

*Exegesis* is the analysis of a biblical text to draw out the meaning of the text: *ex* meaning out, *agein* meaning to lead or draw. This is in contrast to *eisegesis*, meaning to impose the reader's ideas onto the text. Exegesis is commonly used to describe both the method of analysing the meaning of scripture and the resulting description of meaning from the application of that method. Theological students are exhorted to practice exegesis, not eisegesis. Medieval allegorical and typological interpretations of scripture, where OT texts were predominantly considered as pre-configurations of the incarnation of Jesus in the NT, would now be considered *eisegetical* interpretations.

Research into hermeneutics, particularly phenomenological, existential, and postmodern approaches as outlined in the previous section, has highlighted the fact that interpretation is fundamentally a subjective discipline, affected by the biases and background of the interpreter. If the goal of exegesis is to find a single, correct, objective meaning of the text independent of the interpreter, then this is an unattainable goal. As Thomas Nagel identifies, there is no such thing as "the view from nowhere", and while we cannot be purely objective, by recognizing and articulating our viewpoints, we can be more objective.[64]

The historical-critical method of exegesis is the dominant exegetical technique taught to biblical studies students. The goal of the method is to identify, as far as is practical, the intended meaning of the text in its original social and historical context. By drawing on a

[64] Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1989).

wide range of different critical techniques, exegetical methods are constructed so that sources of misinterpretation by the reader can be avoided. In homiletics, for example, obtaining this best understanding of the original meaning is a prelude to identifying the meaning and application of the text to a faith community today. If there is such as a thing, an historical-critical exegesis of a text could be considered a "standard" exegesis. Most standard commentaries are based on an extended version of this type of exegesis.

The historical-critical method is sometimes used narrowly to mean looking at the historical background of a text, but here it is used to mean investigating the meaning of the text in its original historical setting. The technique typically follows a process such as the following from Douglas Stuart's textbook on OT exegesis:[65]

- First, define the limits of the text to be analysed, taking care that the passage forms a suitably complete unit of text.
- In the original language, identify textual variants and reconstruct the version of the text to be considered for translation. Prepare a tentative translation, and then compare this with existing translations. Investigate any grammatical, textual, or semantic issues, and undertake word studies on any important words.
- Identify the general literary genre and specific literary form, and analyse the completeness of the form, looking for any broken or incomplete forms. Look at literary patterns, and reasons for those patterns.
- Examine the historical background, the social setting, historical foreground, geographical setting, and date the passage.
- Examine literary function, literary placement and context, and authorship.
- Look at the biblical context, the placement of the passage, its use elsewhere in scripture and its importance in the biblical canon.
- Locate the passage theologically, identify theological issues raised or solved, and identify the passage's theological importance.
- Identify the possible application areas of this passage in its original setting, and in its use today.

[65] Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (Louisville, KT: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

- After this original analysis, investigate what others have written about the passage and revise the earlier steps accordingly.

Having developed this historical-critical analysis, either individually or based on this same sort of analysis in good-quality contemporary biblical commentaries, the text is now available for other forms of hermeneutical exploration. For example, rhetorical analysis might investigate the message that the author seeks to convey, and its intended effect on the reader. Narrative criticism might look at the roles of characters and the development of plot. The history of interpretation would summarise the different ways in which the text has been interpreted over the centuries. Feminist approaches would examine gender bias, liberationist readings would look for how the text has been used to support domination over particular groups, and sociological readings would look at what patterns of human social behaviour are examined in the text.

In this thesis, it is not intended to undertake a detailed historical-critical exegesis of each passage. Modern English translations of the text will be used as the starting point, along with good quality commentaries to identify significant interpretive issues of the text, including translational, as well as literary, historical, or social issues affecting the interpretation of the text. A detailed history of interpretation will be undertaken to understand previous uses of the text and to demonstrate how any new interpretations are original.

The exact technique to be used will be described in significant detail later, but it is worth noting here that there are two separate steps that address virtues and vices. The eco-virtues reading will often be preceded by an exegesis to reveal the original meaning of the passage. Then, the first eco-virtues step draws out the virtues and vices that are depicted in the text taking note of their original setting. The second eco-virtues step is a hermeneutical reflection on how these virtues and vices may be relevant to the current ecological crisis. It will hopefully be clear that I am not trying to read today's ecological crisis back into the original biblical texts.

## 2.5 Eco-theology

A watershed publication in the recent history of environmental theology was Lynn White's 1967 publication *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.*[66] White accused the

[66] Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967).

prevailing western, Christian view of humanity's relationship to nature of bearing significant blame for the ecological crisis:

> We would seem to be headed toward conclusions unpalatable to many Christians. … as we now recognize, somewhat over a century ago science and technology-hitherto quite separate activities-joined to give mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecologic effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt.[67]

Many contemporary theologians have responded to White's claim by looking to scripture for guidance. There has been an explosion in academic interest in the theology of the environment, which parallels the contemporary secular concerns about the modern ecological crisis.

In this section, current trends in eco-theology are reviewed. First, systematic theological investigations into recovering a doctrine of creation are summarised. Since this thesis deals with interpreting scripture to uncover creation care insights, a more extended review of ecological hermeneutics is then presented.

### 2.5.1 Recovering a Doctrine of Creation

Since the late 20th century, there has been a movement to recover an earlier link between theology and creation. The theological focus of the 16th century Reformation and the Counter-Reformation was largely on exploring the Christian doctrine of salvation, and this emphasis has been dominant for the past 500 years. A significant number of influential writers over the last half-century have sought to recover and re-emphasize the equally important doctrine of creation that runs throughout scripture. The lack of emphasis on the doctrine of creation is seen by these writers as a contributor to the current ecological crisis, as will be explained below.

The German reformed theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, links creation, salvation, and an emphasis on the Trinitarian nature of God in his comprehensive theological writings.[68] He links the creation event in Genesis with the redemption of all creation through Christ and the eschatological fulfilment and perfection of creation. He sees the death and resurrection of

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[67] White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1206.
[68] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1985). These same themes also appear in many of his other publications.

Christ not just as the central event of salvation history, but also the central event of creation history. His concept of a social Trinity is heavily influenced by the Eastern theological concept of the *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) of the three persons of God, which will be extended to *perichoresis* with all creation at the eschaton. His Trinitarian theology sees God, especially God the Spirit, as present in all creation (*panentheism*) as the whole cosmos is gradually perfected and redeemed as the final act of creation.

In his *Travail of Nature*, Paul Santmire also identifies this separation of the doctrines of creation and salvation as a key failing of theology during modernity.[69] Santmire asserts two ways that theologians view the core of scripture, and he calls these a spiritual motif and an ecological motif. The spiritual motif emphasises the salvation of individual souls, and it sees redemption as the human spirit rising above the world to meet God in heaven. By contrast, the ecological motif sees the human body and soul together being part of the salvation and redemption of the cosmos. Santmire extends this work in *Nature Reborn*, where, like Moltmann, he seeks a unifying view of creation and salvation.[70] He proposes a unifying hermeneutical lens which he calls "the future and the fullness thereof." He sees that creation is an unfinished task, that we are still in the Sabbath day of creation, there has not yet been any evening of the last day of creation, and creation will be complete as part of the eschatological fulfilment of the joint acts of creation and salvation. He then proposes that Christians need to find a new way to live in relationship with the rest of creation.

Sean McDonough presents a detailed and cogent historical perspective on how the doctrines of creation and salvation have been presented through history. This includes a discussion of early Christian thinkers (Athanasius, Iranaeus, Augustine) through the Middle Ages (Aquinas, Calvin) through to recent times (Barth, Gunton).[71] His key assertion is that these are not separate doctrines, but rather are part of a single unifying Christian doctrine that he calls "creation and new creation". Furthermore, this is not a new idea, but rather an ancient idea well understood by earlier thinkers but lost in recent times. A significant component of

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[69] H Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985).
[70] H Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).
[71] Sean M McDonough, *Creation and New Creation: Understanding God's Creation Project* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2017).

his work deals with metaphysical themes such as free will, creation through space and time, and human destiny as beings created in the image of God and redeemed by Christ.

Charles Birch and John Cobb explore environmental ethics and the relationship between humanity and non-human creation, particularly in the context of the value of life.[72] Their central view of creation is what they refer to as an ecological view, i.e., that creatures do not exist as isolated organisms, but rather as part of an interrelated ecosystem. A tiger is only fully a tiger when it exists within its appropriate ecosystem. Destroying this ecosystem, or removing creatures from such an ecosystem, is a form of oppression. The goal of their book is to argue for the liberation of creation from such oppression. In the case of humans, this oppression extends to social and political oppression. Birch and Cobb also argue against a simplistic notion of the "balance of nature", i.e., that there is a preferred, stable ecosystem that is the goal of the liberation of creation. Instead, they emphasise that nature is an unstable system where organisms compete and struggle for survival, and this is a core component of the continuing creation story of life on earth.

Denis Edwards, an Australian Catholic Trinitarian theologian, has examined the historical trajectory of the Christian understanding of creation. His survey looks at patristic, medieval, reformation and recent theological understandings of creation and he identifies three main trajectories through this time.

> 1. Creation is a Trinitarian Act: God, the Source of All, creates all things through the Wisdom/Word of God and in the Spirit. In the indwelling Spirit, God is intimately present to each creature, enabling it to participate in existence, and setting it free to be itself within a community of creation.
>
> 2. Creation is always directed towards the radical self-giving love expressed in the incarnation: God creates each creature out of love, and then embraces human beings, and with them the whole creation, in the unbreakable bond of love expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.
>
> 3. The incarnation is a dynamic and inclusive act of transformation: The incarnation, involving the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, is for the sake of salvation and

[72] Charles Birch and John B Cobb, *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

> deification, the liberation and adoption of humans and the healing and final fulfilment of all creation in Christ.[73]

A unifying theme of all these writers is that creation and the salvation of that creation are intimately linked. Salvation is not just for humanity, but for all of creation, and humanity is called to be part of God's mission to redeem creation. This can only happen when a respectful and just relationship between humanity and non-human creation is sought.

In the context of this thesis, restoration of a just relationship between humanity and creation is assumed to be one goal of eco-theological reflection. The work of this thesis is not to prove intellectually that such a relationship is desirable, but rather to use scripture to reflect upon the reasons that we are unwilling to adopt such a relationship as part of our Christian mission and to promote a change towards the integration of creation and salvation among Christians.

### 2.5.2 Ecological Hermeneutics

A key component of eco-theology is ecological hermeneutics, i.e., identifying ways to read the Bible ecologically. David Horrell recently led a UK government-funded research project to investigate the use of the Bible in environmental ethics, and as part of this work, he provided a categorization of eco-theology approaches.[74] This is, in part, based on the earlier work of Francis Watson.[75] He calls the first category "readings of recovery", which are based around the idea that the Bible has a clear message promoting creation care, but this needs to be "recovered" from a history of misinterpretation. For example, the notion of human dominion over creation should properly be understood as responsible stewardship of creation.[76]

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[73] Denis Edwards, *Christian Understandings of Creation: The Historical Trajectory* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 303.
[74] David G Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21, no. 2 (2008).
[75] Francis Watson, "Strategies of Recovery and Resistance: Hermeneutical Reflections on Genesis 1-3 and Its Pauline Reception," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 14, no. 45 (1992).
[76] Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances," 221-224.

Horrell's second category is called Readings of Resistance (type A), where "the approach is not one of rediscovering the positive value of texts hidden beneath a history of misinterpretation but of facing, resisting, and escaping intrinsically negative texts."[77]

Horrell's third category is Readings of Resistance (type B) which rejects the ethical agenda of creation care as being counter to the traditional interpretation of the Bible.[78] An example of this approach are publications by the evangelical Cornwall Alliance which supports continued fossil fuel use as necessary for human flourishing, which is sceptical of climate change and which rejects the ability of human action to affect planetary systems.[79] While one could argue that many Christians live as if care for creation is not part of their faith, these readings have little traction in academic circles and are not considered further here.

The following sections review the remaining categories in more detail.

### 2.5.3 Liberation Eco-theology (or Readings of Resistance)

This most radical of the eco-theology approaches is one based on the principles of liberation theology and its later derivatives (e.g., feminist philosophy, womanist philosophy). Liberation theology is a form of praxis-based theology, originating in concern for the poor and disenfranchised in South America. One of the pioneers, Clodovis Boff, describes the approach in terms of three praxis-based mediations.[80]

A socio-analytic mediation looks first at society to analyse what is wrong, and what needs changing. Secondly, a hermeneutic mediation uses scripture to judge society, especially in those areas identified previously by social analysis, to see whether society fits or not with God's plan for the world. Thirdly, practical mediation acts to change society so that it better fits with God's plan for the world.

Derivatives of liberation theology have used a similar approach to focus on specific marginalized or oppressed groups in society. Feminist theologians such as Rosemary

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[77] Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances," 225.
[78] Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances," 228-231.
[79] James Wanliss, *Resisting the Green Dragon: Dominion, Not Death*, 2nd ed. (Burke, VA: Cornwall Alliance, 2013).
[80] Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009).

Radford Ruether questioned the existing patriarchal structure of the Church and sought to change it.[81] Ruether later extended her feminist theology to also encompass eco-theology.[82]

Another important group of eco-theologians using a liberation theology approach is Norman Habel and the Earth Bible Team.[83]

In the Earth Bible Project (EBP), Habel and his colleagues firstly developed six guiding ecojustice principles:

1. The Principle of Intrinsic Worth

The universe, the Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value.

2. The Principle of Inter-connectedness

The Earth is a community of inter-connected living things which are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.

3. The Principle of Voice

The Earth is a living entity capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.

4. The Principle of Purpose

The universe, the 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

The Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners with, rather than rulers over, the Earth to sustain its balance and diversity.

6. Principle of Resistance

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[81] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993).
[82] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004).
[83] Norman C Habel, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, vol. Vol. 1 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

> The Earth and its components not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans, but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.[84]

These ecojustice principles are then used to understand scripture from the viewpoint of Earth. Habel doubts that it is always possible to find an interpretation of scripture that is consistent with ecojustice: "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."[85] Examples of such grey texts include humanity's dominion over creation in Genesis 1 and Psalm 8. The treatment of such texts is a key difference between readings of resistance and readings of recovery.

The ecojustice principles are extra-biblical in the sense that they are not derived from scripture. An early part of the Earth Bible Project was to establish principles that provide a framework to read the Bible from the viewpoint of Earth.[86] The principles were developed by EBP academics in dialogue with ecologists and their writings. These principles are not used in isolation but are used heuristically in association with the more traditional tools of biblical scholarship.

Several other notable writers have criticized the use of extra-biblical interpretive principles. Hilary Marlow has three objections to the EBP approach. She has difficulties with a set of interpretive principles that lack a strong scriptural foundation; she identifies unclear terminology in the definitions of the principles, and she has difficulties with the fundamental concepts of the eco-justice principles.[87]

Horrell summarizes his criticism of the eco-justice principles: "Such an approach eschews any attempt to show how these [eco-justice] values can emerge (or indeed have emerged) from a (particular) reading of the tradition, and thus, crucially, severely limits its ability to be persuasive for those within that tradition."[88]

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[84] Habel, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, Vol. 1, 1.
[85] Norman C Habel, *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?* (Adelaide, Australia: ATF Press 2009).
[86] Habel, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, Vol. 1, 1.
[87] Hilary Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 94-98.
[88] Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances."

In his analysis, Ernst Conradie identified a key concern about the eco-justice principles and the EBP's response:

> The articulation of these principles helps to pose new questions to the Biblical texts. This may lead to the discovery of new concepts, insights and dimensions embedded in the text that may not have been seen before. Does this not fall into the trap of reading one's own assumptions into the text? The Earth Bible team acknowledge this danger but argues that each interpreter approaches a text with a set of governing assumptions that often remain unarticulated and subconscious and that are therefore even more dangerous.[89]

Conradie also identified the key methodological contribution of the EBP:

> The approach of the Earth Bible project may clearly be described in terms of a "hermeneutic of suspicion". It acknowledges that we as members of the human community have indeed exploited, oppressed, and endangered the existence of the Earth community. … And, as a "hermeneutic of retrieval", it seeks to discern and retrieve alternative traditions that would allow Earth community to flourish yet again.[90]

So overall, Conradie acknowledges that the contribution of the EBP is positive.

After consideration of the critiques about the EBP ecojustice principles from several commentators, Habel proposed a modified ecological hermeneutic, based on the liberation theology steps of suspicion, identification and retrieval. This was effectively how the EBP ecojustice principles were being used anyway.[91] Habel describes these three tasks:

> (1) acknowledging the probable anthropocentric bias both within the text and within traditional interpretations;
>
> (2) identifying with Earth and Earth community as kin who are subjects in the narrative;

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[89] Ernst M Conradie, "Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project," *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa* 85, no. 1 (2004): 128.
[90] Conradie, "Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project," 128-129.
[91] Norman C Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C Habel and Peter L Trudinger (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Lit, 2008), 3-5.

> (3) seeking to retrieve the perspective or voice of Earth and Earth community of whom we humans are but one species.[92]

These three steps align this ecological hermeneutic with similar hermeneutical approaches in liberation theology. In combination with the ecojustice principles, this hermeneutic encourages a radical interpretation of scripture, and in some cases an active rejection of parts of scripture as being counter to God's plan for creation. For example, in discussing Genesis 1, Habel "retrieves" the voice of Earth: "My voice needs to be heard and the intrusive story about the humans in Gen1:26–28 named for what it is from my perspective: the charter of a group of power-hungry humans."[93]

Hilary Marlow reflects on the EBP approach as follows:

> Such a determinative and reader-centred hermeneutic is not the only way of investigating the potential for the Old Testament to inform contemporary ethical reflection. An alternative way forward would be to investigate how the biblical material portrays ancient Israelite understanding of the world, its world view, with the aim of determining a broader paradigm through which to explore the text—one that might be relevant for contemporary ecological ethics. Such an approach would focus rather more on the world of the text, while recognizing that it is being read through the lens of the twenty-first century.[94]

### 2.5.4 Liberal Eco-theology (Or Readings of Recovery)

Liberal eco-theology is situated within the broader category of liberal theology. It is not necessarily distinct from readings of resistance (liberation eco-theology) and it shares an emphasis on action. Many theologians would align with both categories.

Liberal eco-theology typically takes a critically selective approach to scripture and balances scriptural knowledge with modern scientific knowledge.[95] For example, liberal theologians are comfortable with the co-existence of Genesis as a theological account of creation that is not in conflict with evolution and a four-billion-year-old earth as a scientific account of creation history.

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[92] Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics," 8.
[93] Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics," 8.
[94] Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, 95.
[95] Michael Langford, *The Tradition of Liberal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

Many of the liberal eco-theology writers do not emphasise the biblical exegesis of individual passages. Instead, they take a more holistic view of scripture in developing their theological insights. James Gustaffson, for example, understands the ecological crisis, as well as many other modern problems, as the result of an anthropocentric world view, rather than a theocentric view.[96] Joshtrom Kureethadam identifies the ecological crisis as the result of overconsumption, which is a sin, and the first step should be repentance.[97]

Liberal eco-theology is distinguished from liberation eco-theology on the basis of its fundamental theoretical outlook. Liberation eco-theology sees the current ecological crisis as a distortion of God's plan for the world caused by the oppression of the environment, and also the oppression of the world's poor who are most directly affected by ecological damage. Liberal eco-theology sees the current ecological crisis as a scientifically verified truth that requires a unified and rational plan of action to overcome. The ecological crisis is a social justice issue when society is viewed as the whole web of creation. Liberal eco-theology balances the authority of scripture with reason (looking at the scientific evidence) and experience (the pain of a suffering planet and the world's poor) and it does not have a strong emphasis on biblical criticism.

As mentioned earlier, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. This thesis is influenced by both these approaches. In common with liberal theology, the thesis accepts the modern scientific evidence of an environmental crisis, and the subsequent need to respond to that crisis. In seeking to recover meaning from scripture both to identify the human causes of the crisis and to recover scriptural insights about how to address those problems, it uses aspects of liberation theology to look beyond the anthropocentric bias in the texts.[98]

### 2.5.5 Some Key Eco-theologians

Prominent eco-theologians today span the theological spectrum from liberation theology through to evangelical theology. This section provides a summary of some of the key contributors without necessarily attempting to place them in particular categories.

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[96] James M Gustafson, *A Sense of the Divine the Natural Environment from a Theocentric Perspective* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994).
[97] Joshtrom Kureethadam, *Creation in Crisis: Science, Ethics, Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).
[98] For example, in the prodigal son, the son's ultimate fall from grace is indicated by him feeding the pigs, while his return to favour is indicated by him feasting on the fatted calf, implicitly indicating a preferred hierarchy of importance between humans and animals.

Hilary Marlow presents a hermeneutical technique based on the concept of three relationships (God-human, God-creation, human-creation) that form an "ecological triangle."[99] She uses this technique in ecological interpretations of several prophetic books of the Old Testament. The focus of these interpretations is that a breakdown in any one of the relationships described above affects all three pairs of relationships. If the relationship between God and humanity is suffering, then so is creation. Poor human-creation relations also damage our relationship to God.

Marlow's scriptural analysis uses passages where there are strong descriptions of a suffering creation or a restored creation. So, the prophetic book of Micah is not analysed because "most of the references to the created world are brief and passing."[100] Marlow's technique takes passages where there are strong ecological images and moves these images from the background to the foreground of attention. Her technique provides a new focus on the role of Earth, especially in prophetic literature. However, her technique is not intended to be used for passages without such descriptions. In contrast, this thesis looks at techniques for ecological reading of scripture that can address a broader range of texts, even those without explicit ecological imagery.

Ernst Conradie also explores what an environmental hermeneutic might look like.[101] He argues that for ecological hermeneutics, the key step is one of re-appropriation, i.e., linking (ancient) text and (contemporary) context. It is an imaginative task of searching for the similar among the dissimilar. Conradie also believes that *doctrinal constructs* are necessary bridges between text and context. He highlights three such doctrinal constructs in general biblical interpretation oriented around salvation – victory over death, healing of broken relationships, and the moral influence of the Bible.

For Conradie, identifying an ecological hermeneutic is then the task of identifying a suitable doctrinal construct. For ecological readings, he finds three common doctrinal constructs: human responsibility or stewardship, the sacredness of creation, and an appropriate vision for the future. However, he believes that a focus of ecological hermeneutics primarily on the doctrine of creation is insufficient and that an ecological hermeneutic needs to address all of

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[99]Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, 109.
[100] Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, 113.
[101] Ernst M Conradie, "What on Earth Is an Ecological Hermeneutics? Some Broad Parameters," in *Ecological Hermeneutics. Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. David G Horrell, Christopher Southgate, and Francesca Stavrakopoulou (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2010).

the doctrines of the church, including "the trinity, God as Father, creation, humanity, sin, providence, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, the church, the sacraments and Christian hope."[102] His later work has begun this project using the doctrinal construct of the Earth as the household of God and addressing the doctrines of creation, salvation and consummation.[103]

Larry Rasmussen has been promoting a progressive attitude for 20 years since his seminal work in Christian environmental ethics, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*.[104] His recent writings use a combination of scripture, science, tradition, social sciences and the social gospel to argue a strong case for a different environmental ethic, which treats the earth as intrinsically valuable, and which includes all creation in the domain of ethical concern. He promotes the value of religion as a means for enacting a transition away from a consumerist lifestyle to a more sustainable lifestyle as part of an earth community.[105]

Steven Bouma-Prediger uses a somewhat similar approach to the EBP in the sense that he develops a set of environmental ethical principles (biodiversity, responsibility, sustainability, rejuvenation, beneficence, equity) which parallel the eco-justice principles.[106] However, he deliberately derives these principles from motifs he finds throughout scripture. A more detailed analysis of his work is in section 2.7 below since it explicitly uses ecological virtues that are central to this thesis. Section 2.7 also reviews other eco-theologians working specifically in the area of ecological virtue ethics.

As mentioned earlier, David Horrell led a research project on the use of the Bible in environmental ethics, and he edited a volume on environmental hermeneutics as one outcome of that project.[107] After reviewing many different hermeneutical approaches, he proposes his own approach which combines Christian tradition with a new way of looking at texts ecologically. He believes that an ecological hermeneutic needs to respect the original text,

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[102] Conradie, "Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project," 133.
[103] Ernst M Conradie, *The Earth in God's Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective* (Zurich, Switzerland: LIT Verlag, 2015).
Ernst M Conradie, "The Earth in God's Economy: Reflections on the Narrative of God's Work," *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa* 97, no. 1 (2008).
[104] Larry L Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* ( Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).
[105] Larry L Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[106] Steven Bouma-Prediger, "Creation Care and Character: The Nature and Necessity of the Ecological Virtues," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 50, no. 1 (1998).
[107] David G. Horrell et al., *Ecological Hermeneutics Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (London, UK: T & T Clark, 2010).

respect Christian tradition, and be informed by modern science. He proposes using the following doctrinal lenses, based on traditional theological foundations: the goodness of all creation; humanity as part of the community of creation; interconnectedness in failure and flourishing; God's covenant with all creation; creation's calling to praise God; and liberation and reconciliation for all things.[108]

### 2.5.6 Integral Ecology

The term "Integral Ecology" has gained new prominence since its use by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*, where a whole chapter is devoted to the topic.[109] For Francis, Integral Ecology is an approach to humanity's understanding of creation and humanity's relationship with creation which combines different perspectives into an integrated whole. An Integral Ecology seeks to develop a holistic view of life on earth which combines environmental science with religion, ethics, social science, economics, history, arts, and culture. Integral ecology has as its goal the promotion of the common good, which in turn Francis defines (from Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Gaudium et Spies,*1965) as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment."[110]

Francis is not the first environmental writer to use the term "Integral Ecology." While the term always has a connotation of combining multiple perspectives, the range of those perspectives differs. Sam Mickey, Adam Robbert and Laura Reddick provide a useful summary of the early history of its use.[111] The first explicit use of Integral Ecology was in 1958 by Hilary Moore to describe ecological study that combines the study of both organisms and the ecosystems in which those organisms live.[112] The term was extended to include religious and social aspects of ecology by the liberation theologians Leonardo Boff and Virgilio Elizondo in 1995.[113] In a later collaboration in 2009 with Mark Hathaway, Boff

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[108] David G Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology* (London, UK: Routledge, 2015), 129-136.
[109] Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter, Laudato Si*. Chapter 4. Integral Ecology, paras 137-162
[110] Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter, Laudato Si*., para 156, *quoting*
Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium Et Spes, Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Vatican: Vatican Library, 1965). para 26.
[111] Sam Mickey, Adam Robbert, and Laura Reddick, "The Quest for Integral Ecology," *Integral Review: A Transdisciplinary & Transcultural Journal for New Thought, Research, & Praxis* 9, no. 3 (2013): 11-24.
[112] Hilary Moore, *Marine Ecology* (New York, NY: Wiley 1958), 7.
[113] Leonardo Boff and Virgilio P Elizondo, "Ecology and Poverty Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor," *Concilium: International Journal of Theology* 5 (1995): ix.

describes Integral Ecology as combining the scientific study of creatures and their environments, the socioeconomic and political issues of ecology, and the religious and ethical issues.[114] Boff and Hathaway's work builds on earlier work of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme who believe evolutionary processes are characterized by differentiation (similar to Boff and Hathaway's scientific study), subjectivity (similar to religious and ethical aspects) and communion (similar to socioeconomic issues).[115]

Other writers have also used Integral Ecology to describe the combination of insights from multiple perspectives. For example, Ken Wilber uses an AQAL, "all-quadrant, all-level" model of the different perspectives that should be considered in an integral framework of ecological study.[116] The quadrants correspond to four different broad classes of the target of study (subjective, intersubjective, objective, interobjective), while the levels consist of physical, mental, and spiritual levels of reality. These levels are similar to the different aspects of Berry and Swimme and of Boff and Hathaway. Zimmerman describes the AQAL quadrants in terms of the different areas of university study – fine arts, humanities, natural sciences, and systemic natural sciences.[117]

Pope Francis uses the term "Integral Ecology" in an even broader manner than these earlier writers. He doesn't just propose that different perspectives are useful to understanding ecology, but rather suggests that social, economic, religious and ethical issues are all part of an integrated understanding of human flourishing, or the "common good" as described earlier.[118] In particular, social problems and ecological problems share a common root in terms of ethical choices: "we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*."[119]

Francis' notion of Integral Ecology has been adopted by many recent eco-theologians to emphasise that the ecological crisis is not just a technological issue, it is also an ethical issue,

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[114] Mark Hathaway and Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 301.
[115] Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story* (San Franciso:, CA: Harper, 1992), 66-78.
[116] Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Shambhala 2000), 149-153.
[117] Michael E Zimmerman, "Integral Ecology: A Perspectival, Developmental, and Coordinating Approach to Environmental Problems," *World Futures* 61, no. 1-2 (2005): 52.
[118] Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter, Laudato Si*, 156-158.
[119] Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter, Laudato Si.*, 49

and so any solution must include spiritual and ethical dimensions. For example, Celia Deane-Drummond says of Integral Ecology:

> At present there are no more effective alternative narratives in the public sphere that will serve to inspire sustained societal transformation. … it integrates the human into an ecological account while not losing sight of the importance of human dignity and stresses the importance of sustaining hope that a better world is possible without falling into hubris.[120]

In terms of this thesis, the same vices that lead to social oppression, global inequity, and third world poverty also lead to ecologically unsustainable lifestyles, while the virtues that enable social problems to be addressed are also needed for ecological sustainability. Integral Ecology acknowledges that the ecological crisis cannot be solved by purely technological solutions, but rather benefits from theological and ethical investigations such as those that form part of this thesis.

### 2.5.7 Summary

None of these approaches has fully solved the problem of developing a widely applicable ecological hermeneutic. Each writer has used their proposed technique in different ways. Marlow's work concentrates on Old Testament prophetic passages which explicitly deal with the relationships between God, humans and non-human creation. Bouma-Prediger's work deals with scripture-wide motifs and does not lend itself to the analysis of individual passages. Horrell's longer list of doctrinal lenses already summarises a theology of creation, and so it is unclear what new insights they can yield outside that theology. Conradie's doctrinal key of the household of God comes closest to a generally applicable hermeneutical tool. However, this key is most useful in developing an ecologically relevant systematic theology, rather than addressing the problem of reflective readings of individual texts. So, I believe there is still scope to investigate new generally applicable approaches for ecological reflection on scripture.

A current emphasis in ecological hermeneutics, such as in the work of the authors above, has been the recovery of a sound doctrine of humanity's relationship with creation, including analysis of how previous doctrines have distorted the content of scripture. However, it is not

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[120] Celia Deane-Drummond, "Living Narratives: Defiant Earth or Integral Ecology in the Age of Humans?," *The Heythrop Journal* 59, no. 6 (2018): 923-924.

enough just to know what sound doctrine is. In addition, scripture is a persuasive text that can act as a mirror to show how our current relationship with creation is broken, why that relationship is broken, and what steps we might take to restore good relationships. This mirror shows us both the good and the bad in humanity. So rather than focusing on doctrine, this thesis plans to investigate how scripture can enlighten us about good moral choices that lead to better relationships with creation.

## 2.6 Environmental Ethics

Our individual and corporate actions concerning the environment are ethical issues, and so some introduction to the substantial body of work in environmental ethics and the wider domain of moral philosophy is necessary. In this thesis, particular attention will be paid to Virtue Ethics, one particular framework for ethical decision making. As I will subsequently show, Virtue Ethics and Christian discipleship have some interesting commonalities.

This section will first describe Virtue Ethics in terms of its relationship to other ethical frameworks, and it will include a short history of Virtue Ethics since this is a framework that has gone in and out of favour over time.

### 2.6.1 Ethical Frameworks

There are three possible areas of attention for an ethical framework, i.e., a framework that attempts to identify good ethical decisions. First, there is the actor who makes the ethical choice, and **aretological** ethical frameworks, such as Virtue Ethics, concentrate on the moral character of the actor. Secondly, a framework could look at the action itself, and **deontological** ethical frameworks look at choosing correct actions. Such frameworks are typically based on rights, maxims, or universal laws. Thirdly, the likely outcome of the actions can influence a decision, and **teleological** frameworks are based on making ethical choices with the best outcomes. For example, utilitarianism prefers actions that yield the greatest good for the greatest number.

Both teleological and deontological frameworks are problematic, in that they largely assume that any rational person can reason whether an act is good or bad, and then take the appropriate moral action. They provide no practical assistance in choosing to act morally, and they provide no solution to the common human dilemma that right desire does not necessarily lead to right action, or as St Paul puts it: “For I have the desire to do what is good, but I

cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing." (Rom 7:18-19)

Both deontological and teleological frameworks also have difficulties when extending their use to concerns about ethical ecological behaviour. In ecological ethics, a significant issue with teleological frameworks is how one measures the greater good. How might one compare the protection of an endangered species with the potential livelihoods of thousands of mine workers? In deontological environmental ethics, a key issue is deciding what rights are held by non-human creation, especially since it would seem inappropriate for a common mosquito and an endangered species of whale to have the same rights.

In contrast, Virtue Ethics concentrates on the nature of the actor rather than on the act or its outcome. A good act is the type of act done by a good person, i.e., a virtuous person. Virtue Ethics provides the philosophical background for the biblical readings in this thesis, so a review of the history and tenets of Virtue Ethics follows.

#### *2.6.1.1 Virtue Ethics before the Enlightenment*

Virtue Ethics originates with Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics. [121] Aristotle defines four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. He proposes that each virtue has a mean, and this is the virtuous target, whereas either a deficiency or an excess of that characteristic is a vice. For example, a deficiency of fortitude is cowardice, an excess is recklessness. According to Aristotle, a virtue is not just a rational concept, rather virtues are learnt by acting virtuously. A person becomes temperate by practising temperance. Human happiness is achieved by living virtuously.

The next major figure in the history of Virtue Ethics is Thomas Aquinas and his *Summa Theologica.*[122] Like Aristotle, he believed that virtues provide a basis for a fulfilling life. He used exactly the virtues from Aristotle which he called cardinal or human virtues and then added the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. Aquinas' writings in this area form the basis of the formulation of virtues in the modern Catholic Catechism which defines human virtues as follows:

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[121] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2000).
[122] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Boston, MA: MobileReference, 2010).

> 1804 Human virtues are firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtuous [person] is [one] who freely practices the good. The moral virtues are acquired by human effort. They are the fruit and seed of morally good acts; they dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with divine love.
>
> 1805 Four virtues play a pivotal role and accordingly are called "cardinal"; all the others are grouped around them. They are: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. "If anyone loves righteousness, her labours are virtues; for she teaches temperance and prudence, justice, and courage."(Wis 8:7) These virtues are praised under other names in many passages of Scripture.[123]

The Catechism then explains the theological virtues of faith, hope and love (or charity):

> 1812 The human virtues are rooted in the theological virtues, which adapt [one's] faculties for participation in the divine nature: for the theological virtues relate directly to God. They dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity. They have the One and Triune God for their origin, motive, and object.
>
> 1813 The theological virtues are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character. They inform and give life to all the moral virtues. They are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life. They are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being. There are three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity.[124]

These definitions provide a Christian view of how virtues are relevant to the moral life. This thesis will use these meanings of cardinal and theological virtues in the subsequent discussions of virtues and vices.

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[123] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), Accessed 28 July 2021. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM. This Catechism was developed under the leadership of Pope John Paul 2 and published in 1992 as a summary of the theological beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. It is intended to act as a reference document that can be used in the preparation of locally developed materials for teaching the faith.

[124] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

#### *2.6.1.2 The Fall and Rise of Virtue Ethics*

Virtue Ethics fell out of favour in the Enlightenment period, as reason alone became the basis for modern secular philosophy. In his introduction to a volume of essays on the topic, Jon Miller proposes that Aristotle's Ethics were considered outdated by modern, rational investigation.[125] Jennifer Welchman quotes Sir Alexander Grant's 1874 foreword to his translation of Nicomachean Ethics.: "Aristotle's Ethics and indeed his philosophy in general are left far in the background by these recent systems. In comparison with all the modern scientific accounts of the development of this Earth and of Man, Aristotle's views are of no value."[126]

The noted British moral philosopher, Henry Sidgwick defended Ethics as the rational study of right and wrong acts, without concern for how or why actors might act: "What ought be done would naturally seem the fundamental question of Ethics proper …appeals to the reason are an essential part of all moral persuasion, and that part which concerns the moralist or moral philosopher as distinct from the preacher."[127]

By the mid-twentieth century, academics were throwing significant doubt on the usefulness of the remote, rational moral judge of philosophers like Sidgwick. Robin George Collingwood wrote, in 1939, criticizing the previous generation of moral philosophers as developing theoretical constructs of little practical use.[128] In 1949, Stuart Hampshire compares Aristotle's goal of developing philosophies to help the moral agent with his contemporaries' work that is theoretical and concerned with a moral judge or critic and is therefore of little practical use.[129]

In her 1958 paper, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, Elizabeth Anscombe was highly critical of the whole direction of modernist moral philosophy.[130] Without repeating all her arguments, her principal point is that none of these modernist philosophies can provide practical guidance about how to act morally, and this is surely the intended purpose of moral philosophy: "The

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[125] Jon Miller, *The Reception of Aristotle's Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.
[126] Jennifer Welchman, ed., *The Practice of Virtue: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Virtue Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006).
[127] Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London, UK: Macmillan, 1907). https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46743/46743-h/46743-h.htm.
[128] RG Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1939).
[129] Stuart Hampshire, "Fallacies in Moral Philosophy," in *Freedom of Mind and Other Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).
[130] G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958).

first [thesis] is that it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking."[131]

Another major figure in the resurgence of interest in Virtue Ethics is Alisdair MacIntyre, with his 1981 book *After Virtue*.[132] He criticizes modern moral philosophy as no longer fulfilling Aristotle's original intention that moral philosophy should be about practical reasoning to make rational ethical decisions. Instead, he sees modern moral philosophy as a collection of abstract moral principles without practical use. Their failure is the separation of philosophical moral reasoning from practical reasoning about real-life choices. In response, he proposes a version of Virtue Ethics, which emphasises the participation of individuals in communities of practice that have developed standards of behaviour that allow those communities to flourish.

Since this thesis will concentrate less on what are morally defensible ecological actions, and more on how people might be encouraged to accept and follow such actions, the concepts of Virtue Ethics will be much more useful than other ethical frameworks. Indeed, virtues and vices will be key components in the proposed novel technique for reading scripture ecologically.

### 2.6.2 Ecological Ethics

The ecological crisis is a topic of significant current ethical research, and so it is also useful to offer a brief overview of the development of environmental ethics over the centuries. Philosophers and non-philosophers alike have long appreciated the value and beauty of the natural world. Creation myths, such as OT creation accounts (Gen 1-3) or the Golden Age of the Greeks, point to pre-historic paradise as a place where there is no death, where humanity lives at peace with nature, and where abundant fruit is available without needing to harm animals to survive.[133]

In his *Republic*, Plato imagines citizens living simply and happily, in harmony with creation around them:

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[131] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy."
[132] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 1981).
[133] Esther Eidinow, "Telling Stories: Exploring the Relationship between Myths and Ecological Wisdom," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 155 (2016).

> They and their children will feast, drinking of the wine which they have made, wearing garlands on their heads, and hymning the praises of the gods, in happy converse with one another. And they will take care that their families do not exceed their means; having an eye to poverty or war.[134]

Conversely, Aristotle in his *Politics* sees a hierarchy of worth, with humans clearly at the top:

> In like manner we may infer that after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for the sake of man … Now if nature makes nothing incomplete, and nothing in vain, the inference must be that she has made all animals for the sake of man.[135]

This view of nature as having instrumental value because of its usefulness to humans continues to have influence today.

Nature has also been seen as having value as an indicator of the creative power of God. Calvin, in his *Institutes of Religion*, writes:

> The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews elegantly describes the visible worlds as images of the invisible (Heb. 11:3), the elegant structure of the world serving us as a kind of mirror, in which we may behold God, though otherwise invisible.[136]

However, these ancient and early modern writers really had no concerns about the ongoing viability of the natural environment. Humans have been altering their environment from prehistoric times. Forests were cleared for fuel, building materials and farmland. From the time of the Industrial Revolution, humanity's ability to alter the natural environment increased significantly. It was not just factories and mechanised agriculture that caused concern. The late 19th century saw national parks appearing around the world in response to alarm at a disappearing wilderness. Yellowstone National Park was established in the USA in 1872, Royal National Park near Sydney, Australia in 1879, and parks were quickly established around the world, as communities feared that wilderness would disappear.

Books like Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) were among the first of a wave of books to protest the damage being done to the earth by industrialized society and they disputed the view of the environment as something with only instrumental rather than

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[134] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. George M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1975)., Book II, 372B
[135] Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1946). Book 1, VIII, para 1.
[136] Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1844). Chap. 5, Section 1.

intrinsic value.[137] In the finale to this book Leopold describes what he calls "The Land Ethic":

> It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value. … The case for a land ethic would appear hopeless but for the minority which is in obvious revolt against these modern trends.[138]

Leopold sees his Land Ethic as an extension to ethics as seeking what is good. Harmony within the biotic community is seen as the ultimate good and harmony is specifically the preservation of the integrity, stability, and beauty of the community.

Over the last century, and particularly in the last fifty years, environmental concerns have come very much to the fore of public consciousness. Alan Marshall is one author who has attempted to categorize how standard ethical boundaries have been extended to allow ethical frameworks to be applied to care for the environment, and he proposes three reasons for the extension of this ethical consideration: Libertarian Extension, Ecological Extension and Conservation Ethics.[139]

Libertarian extension is based on the concept of civil liberties being applied equally to all. Just as ethics has come to recognise that all humans have the right to be treated fairly, these rights are extended to animals, to plants, to all organisms and perhaps to the abiotic environment itself. Libertarian extension is manifest in movements such as animal rights activists. Such an approach uses notions from deontological ethics.

Ecological extension has grown from the scientific realisation that the Earth is a complex community of interrelated species, and human well-being depends on the well-being of the environment as a whole. The environment should be protected to preserve species, ecosystems and biodiversity since all add to the greater good. This approach is teleological.

The conservation ethic sees the environment as having purely instrumental value for humanity. It is sometimes called shallow environmentalism. The environment should be

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[137] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York, NY: Ballantine, 1949).
[138] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 201.
[139] Alan Marshall, "Ethics and the Extraterrestrial Environment," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (1993).

managed and protected to ensure that humans can live the best possible lives. This approach is also teleological.

Approaches such as those included in Marshall's categories above also appear in Christian environmental ethics approaches. However, these teleological and deontological approaches to environmental ethics remain problematic, as will be described in the next section. One alternative approach will be the focus of a more detailed study in this thesis, viz., Christian Environmental Virtue Ethics.

### 2.6.3 Environmental Virtue Ethics

Just as Virtue Ethics has been subject to renewed interest in moral philosophy in general, Virtue Ethics has also been re-examined as a possible framework for formulating an environmental ethic. Teleological ethical frameworks, such as utilitarianism, have difficulty with extension to environmental issues. Should a good environmental outcome maximize the well-being of the human inhabitants of the earth (suggesting the environment has only instrumental value) or should the flourishing of the environment itself be an intrinsic good? Deontological ethical frameworks suggest the extension of ethical rights and responsibilities to the environment, but this also is problematic. On what basis do we decide what these rights are? What claims does the environment have over our actions?

While these questions certainly have academic interest, environmental ethics is primarily a practically oriented discipline. Bill Shaw suggests that Environmental Virtue Ethics (EVE) provides one way around some of the difficulties of other ethical frameworks:

> In virtue ethics we are able to stop fretting about what claims the environment has against us, what rights we may be impinging upon, and concentrate on the more important question of how we as moral agents ought to relate to other environmental communities. From this perspective, the fundamental moral question is not "who has what against me?" but rather "what kind of person should I be?" and, given the enormous complexities and uncertainties of ecological relationships, "how should a person act to foster the well-being of all living communities?"[140]

Shaw suggests three environmental virtues: respect, prudence, and practical judgement. However, he doesn't provide any detailed justification for these virtues, and indeed the latter

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[140] Bill Shaw, "A Virtue Ethics Approach to Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic," in *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, ed. Ronald Sandler and Philip Cafaro (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2005).

two virtues are almost synonymous since prudence is "practical wisdom" and wisdom is making the right judgements.

A seminal work in this EVE field is the 1983 paper by Thomas Hill.[141] Faced with environmental destruction, Hill asks if our only reason for moral unease is because we feel that the unavailability of these resources for future generations outweighs the immediate economic benefit (a teleological approach). He similarly posits that our unease is not because the plants in a forest have moral rights which have been violated (a deontological approach). He suggests that our moral unease at environmental destruction is because it exhibits traits of behaviour such as greed and injustice that we find unpalatable. He then proposes a virtue-based ethical framework. [142] Hill suggests environmental virtues of humility, gratitude, and sensitivity, although he does not claim that this list is complete.

Ronald Sandler investigates how one might derive a set of environmental virtues.[143] The first method is by extension of interpersonal virtues. The second method is agent benefit – a particular environmental virtue benefits the person possessing it. Thirdly, one could argue from human excellence – what it means to be a good person. Fourthly, examining the character of ecological role models can provide a set of environmental virtues. In this thesis, in order to derive ecological virtues (and vices) from scripture, Sandler's first method of extending interpersonal virtues is most useful, since these are abundantly described in scripture, either explicitly or by association with virtuous characters.

Louke van Wensveen argues that almost all ecological discourse is rich with virtue language, but in many cases, this has been almost invisible because of a rights-based approach to environmental ethics. Her list of commonly mentioned environmental virtues includes

> respect for nature, … adaptability, benevolence, care, compassion or solidarity, connectedness, creativity, cooperation, fostering, friendship, frugality, gratitude, healing, hope, inclusivity, joy, justice, moderation or restraint, openness, passion,

[141]Thomas E Hill, "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments," *Environmental Ethics* 5, no. 3 (1983).
[142] Hill, "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments."
[143] Ronald L Sandler, "Introduction," in *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, ed. Ronald L Sandler and Philip Cafaro (Lanham, MD: Rowman& Littlefield, 2005), 1-13.

> perseverance, realism, self-examination, sensuousness, sharing, spontaneity, vulnerability, wisdom and wonder. [144]

Van Wensveen's work on environmental virtues is examined in more detail in section 2.5 below.

Charles Taliaferro explores virtues and vices in the context of religious (multifaith) environmental ethics.[145] He identifies some common virtues amongst theistic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam), which are based on some common tenets – "creation, divine ownership, and the identification of natural goods with God's presence."[146] He subsequently identifies ecological virtues in common with secular ethicists such as humility, self-respect, justice, wisdom, temperance and additionally identifies three specific theistic religious virtues – gratitude for the gift of creation, caring for nature as God's gift, and solidarity with nature. Unlike the planned work in this thesis, Taliaferro does not attempt to use scripture directly to justify these virtues.

Overall, the interest in Virtue Ethics in secular environmental ethics suggests that such an approach may also have value in Christian environmental ethics, which is the broad topic area of this thesis. There is a limited amount of work in this specific area of Christian Environmental Virtue Ethics, and the next section analyses current work which has sought to identify a set of environmental virtues and vices in a Christian context.

### 2.6.4 Ecological Virtues

Several authors have developed sets of ecological virtues as a part of their analysis of an appropriate Christian response to the ecological crisis. This section reviews existing sets of virtues before proposing a list to be used in this thesis.

#### *2.6.4.1 Bouma-Prediger's List of Eco-Virtues*

Steven Bouma-Prediger's list of ecological virtues is one starting point for developing a set of ecological virtues.[147] The list will also be compared with the traditional sets of cardinal and

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[144] Louke van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 11.
[145] Charles Taliaferro, "Vices and Virtues in Religious Environmental Ethics," in *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, ed. Ronald Sandler and Philip Cafaro (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2005).
[146] Taliaferro, "Vices and Virtues in Religious Environmental Ethics."
[147] Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

Christian virtues proposed by Thomas Aquinas,[148] and with the ecological virtues proposed by Celia Deane-Drummond,[149] and Louke van Wensveen.[150]

Bouma-Prediger's methodology starts with the examination of biblical texts, and then he derives what he calls theological motifs, which summarize a stream of biblical thought, then associates an ethical principle and thence virtues with that motif. [151] He identifies six such motifs with associated ethical principles and virtues.

Genesis and the Psalms articulate the theological motif of **Creational Integrity and Dependence**. This motif gives the ethical principle of **biodiversity.** From this principle, ecological virtues of **respect**, **restraint** and **frugality** are derived.

The next motif is **Human Finitude and Faultedness** which is prominent in Genesis 2 and Job. The underlying ethical principle is **responsibility**, and the associated eco-virtues are **humility** and **honesty**.

**Fruitfulness** is a motif evident in Genesis 1, the flood story and resource use rules in Deuteronomy. The corresponding ethical principle is **sustainability**, embodied in the virtues of **wisdom** and **hope**.

**Sabbath** is a theological motif in the Genesis creation story, in the Decalogue in Exodus 20, and the agricultural Sabbath in Leviticus, which is also linked to Jesus' proclamation of the year of jubilee in Luke 4. The corresponding ethical principle of **rejuvenation** is embodied in the virtues of **patience** and **serenity**.

The creation stewardship roles of humanity in the two Genesis creation accounts gives the motif of **Earthkeeping.** This leads to an ethical principle of **beneficence**, and the corresponding eco-virtues of **benevolence** and **love**.

Righteousness and justice are recurring themes throughout the Bible summarised as the theological motif of **Righteousness.** The corresponding ethical principle is **equity** leading to virtues of **justice** and **courage** which extend to ecological justice and courage.

In 2019, Bouma-Prediger published a new book on ecological virtues, where he provides a well-argued case for why Virtue Ethics provides a sound basis for developing a Christian

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[148] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*.
[149] Celia Deane-Drummond, *The Ethics of Nature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).
[150] van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics*.
[151] Bouma-Prediger, "Creation Care and Character: The Nature and Necessity of the Ecological Virtues."

ethical understanding of our relationship to the earth.[152] Rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive list of ecological virtues, instead, he explores a set of eight virtues which he addresses in pairs: **wonder** and **humility**, **self-control** and **wisdom, justice** and **love**, **courage** and **hope**. He introduces each pair using a story that illustrates the virtues and corresponding vices, then describes the traditional understanding of the virtues and how these are consistent with scripture, and he extends their application to an ecological context. He also provides some examples of groups or individuals who practice and teach these ecological virtues. The major addition in Bouma-Prediger's revised set of virtues is **wonder**.

#### *2.6.4.2 Thomist Virtues*

An obvious point of comparison when investigating virtues is the set of cardinal and Christian virtues proposed by Thomas Aquinas.[153] He combined the cardinal virtues from Aristotle (**temperance, prudence, courage**, **justice**),[154] with the additional Christian or theological virtues of **faith, hope, and love**.

Vices are undesirable traits that are the opposite of virtues. They can result from either a lack or deficiency of a virtuous characteristic or an excess of the virtuous characteristic. For example, too little courage is cowardice, too much is foolhardiness. In the case of theological or Christian virtues, vices are deficiencies, or they are misdirections of faith, hope or love away from God.

Thomas does not restrict moral virtues to just the cardinal four listed above. Instead, he sees a hierarchy of virtues. He distinguishes prudence from wisdom, which is seen as an intellectual act. Rather, prudence is "right reason applied to action", or simply "practical wisdom." Prudence helps all the other virtues since acting morally requires wise decisions leading to good actions. Vices associated with prudence include imprudence, negligence, guile, fraud, and solicitude (i.e., excessive concern and anxiety).

Each of the other cardinal virtues also has several associated virtues and corresponding vices.

Justice includes virtues of right judgement, restitution, respect of persons, friendliness, gratitude, obedience, truth, and right worship of God. Justice has associated vices of

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[152] Steven Bouma-Prediger, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2019).
[153] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*.
[154] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

injustice, murder, bodily injury, theft and robbery, unjust judgement, unjust accusation, false witness, reviling, back-biting, gossip, derision, cursing, cheating, usury, perjury, sacrilege, and versions of lying such as boasting and flattery.

Fortitude includes virtues of magnanimity, patience, and perseverance. Vices associated with fortitude include fear, fearlessness, daring, presumption, vainglory, pusillanimity (smallness of spirit, shrinking from challenges), and meanness.

Temperance includes virtues of abstinence, fasting, sobriety, chastity, continence, modesty, humility, studiousness, clemency and meekness, and associated vices are gluttony, drunkenness, incontinence, lust, anger, cruelty, pride, and vain curiosity.

So, when one talks of Thomist cardinal virtues, each of these four cardinal virtues bring a wealth of meaning since they implicitly include these longer lists of virtues and vices.

The three theological virtues (faith, hope and love) appear several times in Paul's epistles (1 Cor: 113:13, Col 1:5, 1 Thess 1:13, 1 Thess 5:8). In terms of the theological virtues, Thomas sees these as substantially different from the cardinal virtues. These are not attitudes and habits that one can cultivate, rather these are gifts from God. These gifts attune our thoughts and actions towards living in accordance with the divine will, and they give us true happiness. In Thomas' view these theological virtues are tied up with (but different to) the gifts of the Spirit, "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness" (Gal 5:22), and with the Beatitudes – "Blessed are the poor in spirit, … those who mourn, ... the meek, …those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, … the merciful, … the pure in heart, … the peacemakers, … the persecuted, ... the insulted) (Matt 3:3-11).

Altogether, Thomas' lists of virtues in these extended forms contain all of Bouma-Prediger's list.

#### *2.6.4.3 Deane-Drummond's Virtues.*

Celia Deane-Drummond bases her *Ethics of Nature* on a Virtue Ethics framework. [155] The introductory chapter outlines her selection of virtues. Deane-Drummond is strongly influenced by Aquinas, and she chooses his four cardinal virtues – prudence (practical wisdom), justice, fortitude, and temperance as the basis for her Environmental Virtue Ethics.

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[155] Deane-Drummond, *The Ethics of Nature*, 1-22.

She also emphasises the primacy of prudence, agreeing with Aquinas that prudence is the "mother of all the other cardinal virtues."[156] In applying Virtue Ethics to environmental ethics in general, and to other related ethical domains such as animals, biotechnology, and cloning, she focusses on prudence as the key to making informed ethical decisions in the domain of complex environmental questions which are most likely to lead to a good life.

She additionally places significant emphasis on justice, where she uses Aquinas' understanding of justice as giving to each person what is rightfully due to them. In environmental ethics, it is necessary to extend the domain of interest to all creation, and so justice becomes the virtue of extending moral consideration to providing just treatment of all creatures, and to the ecosystems that they inhabit.

Consistent with the idea that Virtue Ethics deals more with the actor than with either the actions or their consequences, Deane-Drummond explains the types of attitudes and habits that are associated with these virtues, and how these attitudes and habits would be manifested in particular ethical questions.

Although Deane-Drummond develops her Virtue Ethics framework very much in the context of Christian behaviour, it is somewhat surprising that the three Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love are barely mentioned. Hope is discussed briefly as a particularly Christian virtue that gives confidence rather than despair when the current ecological crisis is considered, but that is the extent of the analysis of these virtues. This perhaps reflects her strong dependence on Aquinas' view that these Christian virtues are gifts of God and not habits that can be acquired.

#### *2.6.4.4 Louke van Wensveen's Metaethical Theory*

Louke van Wensveen is a virtue ethicist who has written extensively on environmental ethics.[157] Rather than defining a particular set of environmental virtues, she has developed frameworks for evaluating the validity of particular virtues and vices. Additionally, she is one of the few mainstream environmental virtue ethicists writing from an explicitly Christian tradition.

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[156] Deane-Drummond, *The Ethics of Nature*, 10.
[157] van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics*; Louke van Wensveen, "Cardinal Environmental Virtues: A Neurobiological Perspective," in *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, ed. Ronald Sandler and Philip Cafaro (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). 173-196

She uses a variety of sources for grounding her environmental ethics – Christian tradition and community, observations from nature, human psychology, and human experience (especially experience of repression). She strongly believes that ecological sustainability is a necessary prerequisite for any set of environmental virtues.[158]

She identifies that virtue language is used extensively in the environmental literature, even if this is not explicitly in the context of Environmental Virtue Ethics. She identifies five characteristics of the current virtue-based discourse. First, the discourse is an integral discourse, by which she means that virtue language provides a unifying basis for communication. Second, it is a diverse discourse, which benefits from a wide range of views and opinions. It is a dialectic discourse, reflecting the tension between the intrinsic value of an untouched environment and its instrumental value to humans. It is a dynamic discourse, with the language of discourse changing and shifting as the field is explored. Finally, it is a visionary discourse without a social ethic, as she explains: "The end result is the curious phenomenon of a discourse committed to social change without a developed theory of social change" and she recommends a greater emphasis on social change.[159]

She also addresses the subjective nature of virtues, where actions might be considered virtuous or vicious depending on the social context of the moral agent.[160] In particular, she suggests that virtues may be misidentified by those who are psychologically repressed, those who are alienated from nature, those who act from a guilty conscience, and those who misinterpret the meaning of virtues.

Because she is writing for a secular audience, her framework has limited usefulness for defining a set of virtues that can be used for reading scripture. In his PhD thesis, Seth Bible evaluates van Wensveen's work from an evangelical perspective.[161] He finds difficulty with the fact that her ethics are not explicitly derived from scripture and are not aligned with a clear gospel message. Her emphasis on human flourishing alone as the teleological end is inconsistent with a Christian ethic, but I believe this is understandable given she is writing for

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[158] Louke Van Wensveen, "Ecosystem Sustainability as a Criterion for Genuine Virtue," *J Environmental Ethics* 23, no. 3 (2001).
[159] van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics*, 17.
[160] In this thesis"vicious" is used to mean immoral, the opposite of virtuous, rather than its more common meaning of deliberately cruel or violent.
[161] Seth A Bible, "Pursuing Ecological Virtue: A Critical Analysis of the Environmental Virtue Ethics Models of Ronald Sandler, Louke Van Wensveen, and Philip Cafaro" (PhD Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011).

a mainstream, secular audience. He also has difficulty with the subjective nature of the metaethical framework.

Although her metaethical framework does not directly give a comprehensive set of ecological virtues and vices, van Wensveen does provide a useful analysis of the four cardinal virtues in ecological terms.[162] After abandoning the task of trying to catalogue virtue language used in ecological ethics, instead, she proposes four distinct classes of virtues.

*Virtues of Position* relate to how we see ourselves in relation to those people and things we interact with. In environmental terms, such virtues are evident in writers such as Aldo Leopold who see humans as part of a larger biotic community.[163] Virtues such as humility, self-acceptance and gratitude fall into this class of virtues.

*Virtues of Care* relate to engaging constructively with those people and environments around us. Such virtues include identifying the needs of others and seeking to meet those needs. Virtues such as friendship, attentiveness and benevolence fall into this class.

*Virtues of Attunement* relate to matching our desires and goals to match the environmental and social situations in which we find ourselves. Virtues such as frugality and simplicity would be included in this class.

*Virtues of Endurance* relate to how we face dangers and difficulties, whether these are imposed from outside or from our own internal desires and emotions. This class includes virtues such as tenacity and loyalty.

Van Wensveen then argues that the traditional four cardinal virtues are each the primary virtue for these four classes. Wisdom is identified as the primary virtue among Virtues of Position, Justice is seen as the primary virtue among Virtues of Care, Temperance is seen as primary for Virtues of Attunement, and Courage is the primary virtue among Virtues of Endurance.[164]

The identifications of temperance with attunement and courage with endurance seem straightforward. The arguments for linking wisdom with virtues of position and justice with virtues of care are less satisfactory. Virtues of position are largely relational in their nature,

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[162] van Wensveen, "Cardinal Environmental Virtues: A Neurobiological Perspective."
[163] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*.
[164] van Wensveen, "Cardinal Environmental Virtues: A Neurobiological Perspective," 186-187.

while wisdom deals more with individual rational thought. Instead, the Christian virtue of hope is more clearly aligned with virtues of position. The Christian virtue of love would seem much more aligned with virtues of care than wisdom. Since the cardinal virtues alone are not a one-to-one match to the various classes, this suggests that there will be benefits in also considering the Christian virtues, especially in the context of reading scripture.

### 2.6.5 Choosing a Set of Ecological Virtues for this thesis

Based on the previous work on eco-virtues, a list for use in this thesis can now be proposed. The traditional list of four cardinal virtues prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance appear in all the lists above, and so these are definitely included in my list.[165]

Bouma-Prediger includes the Christian virtues of love and hope in his lists. The theological virtues of faith, hope, and love are used extensively as a triad in Paul's epistles to characterise the Christian life. I believe that it will also be useful to include the three traditional Christian virtues of faith, hope and love in my list. This also gives a significant point of difference to secular studies of ecological virtues which typically do not include these.

Methodologically, Bouma-Prediger's initial list is most clearly derived from scripture. Of the seven virtues from Aquinas, the only one absent from Bouma-Prediger's list is faith. Some of the virtues in his list are quite similar – benevolence and love are largely synonymous, as are patience and serenity, and frugality and restraint are both largely synonymous with temperance. So apart from the seven traditional virtues and their synonyms, Bouma-Prediger's list includes the following additional virtues: respect, humility, honesty, patience and serenity.

Respect and honesty can be seen as subsidiary virtues to justice, since all these virtues deal with how we deal with each other, giving to each other what is rightfully due. Serenity and patience can be seen as subsidiary virtues to hope since all these virtues deal with our own internal reactions when we face the realities of the current ecological crisis which can lead to the vices of despair and hopelessness. Humility can be seen as a form of temperance with respect to our certainty about our own knowledge and wisdom. Aquinas also lists humility as

[165] Bouma-Prediger uses the words restraint and frugality, which are largely synonymous with temperance.

a subsidiary virtue of temperance. His revised list in his 2019 book adds wonder as an ecological virtue.[166] Wonder can be seen as a subsidiary virtue to love.

For the method adopted in this thesis, it is not necessary to decide on a comprehensive set of virtues before commencing analysis. A provisional set will provide an adequate heuristic framework to start work, and this initial set will benefit from being relatively high level and general in nature. For example, it is not seen as useful to define differences between similar virtues, such as charity and love, or wisdom and prudence. Instead, the list of virtues and vices will be indicative of what to look for in a passage, without being prescriptive.

So, it is sufficient to start with a set of commonly accepted virtues, supported by scripture, and then discover how these can be used to consider how these virtues are reflected in scripture. Initially, I will concentrate on the seven traditional virtues: **Faith, Hope, Love, Wisdom, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance**, while including the possibility of also looking at specific subsidiary virtues such as humility. Since the relevant virtues (and vices) will emerge from each text, a final exhaustive list of virtues is not necessary before starting work.

It is also useful to list the vices associated with each of the seven virtues. For each virtue, there will be a corresponding vice of deficiency and a vice of excess. Examples of associated vices defined by Aquinas were listed earlier in section 2.5.2.

Foolishness or imprudence is the vice of deficiency corresponding to prudence, and an excess of prudence is over-analysis, which refers to the vice of thinking so long and in so much detail that action never follows.[167]

Injustice is a lack of justice, which treats ethical objects without the respect and consideration they deserve. An excess of justice might be termed rigid or cold-hearted justice, taking action based dispassionately on laws regardless of the individual circumstances or likely outcome.

Cowardice is a deficiency of courage and foolhardiness is an excess of courage. Greed and lust are deficiencies of temperance, while miserliness is an excess of temperance.

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[166] Bouma-Prediger, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic*.
[167] There are many more variants of these vices. For example, deficiencies of prudence include faulty reasoning, a lack of sufficient reasoning, and failure to execute a prudent action. It is not the intention to be exhaustive in the list of virtues and vices.

Other subsidiary virtues, such as humility also have vices of deficiency and excess. A deficiency of humility is pride, while an excess of humility is a lack of self-esteem.

Similarly, it is possible to have deficiencies and excesses of the theological virtues, depending on how they are viewed. Aquinas explains that we can never have an excess of love, faith and hope in God, because since God is our yardstick we cannot approach his love, faith and hope:

> The measure and rule of theological virtue is God Himself: because our faith is ruled according to Divine truth; charity, according to His goodness; hope, according to the immensity of His omnipotence and loving kindness. This measure surpasses all human power: so that never can we love God as much as He ought to be loved, nor believe and hope in Him as much as we should. Much less therefore can there be excess in such things.[168]

However, he explains, we can have an excess of these traits in reference to our own expressions of these virtues, which may be misdirected:

> Hope observes the mean between presumption and despair, in relation to us, in so far, to wit, as a man is said to be presumptuous, through hoping to receive from God a good in excess of his condition; or to despair through failing to hope for that which according to his condition he might hope for. But there can be no excess of hope in comparison with God, whose goodness is infinite.[169]

For the theological virtues, I propose that it is more accurate to talk about vices of deficiency and vices of misdirection (rather than excess).

So, the vice of deficiency of hope is hopelessness or despair, and the vice of misdirection is presumptuousness. Unbelief is a lack of faith. Gullibility and hubris are misdirections of uncritical faith in traditional human understandings of God and the world. Hate and disinterest are vices of deficiency of love. Idolatry is a misdirection of love directed towards objects other than God, for example in the worship of the beauty of creation, rather than worship of the creator.

Returning to the four cardinal virtues and their vices, there is some debate about whether the virtues of prudence and justice have vices of excess. For example, Bouma-Prediger lists

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[168] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. Question 64, article 4.
[169] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. Question 64, article 4

love, justice and wonder as virtues which only have a vice of deficiency, claiming that one cannot have too much love, or too much justice, or too much wonder.[170] Considering prudence, then over-analysis or "paralysis by analysis" can be thought of as an excess of prudence, but one might also argue that it is a very unwise course of action. Similarly, applying rules and regulations too strictly, what one might call cold-hearted justice, can be considered an excess of justice, but it can equally be seen as the unfair application of the rules, i.e., a decision lacking justice.

Without attempting to solve what are largely semantic debates, it is worth noting two other ways in which such situations can be categorised that might be helpful. First, the vices of over-analysis and cold-hearted justice can be seen (similar to the theological virtues and vices) as vices of misdirection. In over-analysis, the analytic consideration of alternatives is incorrectly pursued too long, losing sight of the requirement for timely action. With cold-hearted justice, rules may be applied even when the result is an unfair decision because the goal may be to make an example of an offender, or for personal gain by the judge.

The second way of considering vices of excess and deficiency is that not only should each virtue be a mean between extremes, but the virtuous ethical choice should combine all the virtues in appropriate proportions. Using this method, cold-hearted justice is wrong because it does not temper justice with love (think of the woman caught in adultery, John 8:1-7). Over-analysis is wrong because it does not balance consideration of alternatives with the courage to act in a timely way.

Overall, these virtues and vices provide a rich set of points of comparison between biblical texts and modern environmental ethical issues, with a goal of a deepening of understanding for biblical readers in their attitudes towards creation.

## 2.7 Christian Discipleship

This section explains how Christian discipleship is understood in the context of this thesis, and, in particular, what is meant by ecological discipleship. It also explores what constitutes effective ecological discipleship programs. It then investigates small groups and Bible studies in the context of discipleship.

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[170] Bouma-Prediger, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic*, 75-102.

### 2.7.1 Discipleship

The New Testament makes frequent references to disciples. John the Baptist had disciples (John 1:35-37), but the majority of references are to disciples of Jesus. These disciples were followers of Jesus, both literally by accompanying him in his travels, and metaphorically by adopting his teachings. In the gospels and Acts, the Greek word used for disciple is *mathētēs*, meaning 'one who is learning', but this term is never used in the epistles. Instead, terms like brothers and sisters, saints, church, or believers are preferred and all of these terms can be considered somewhat synonymous.[171]

Today, Christian discipleship is understood as the act of following the teachings of Christ, and by implication the teachings of scripture more broadly. One succinct description of modern discipleship is as follows:

> From literal beginnings discipleship acquires metaphorical authority for all believers in Christ. The connotations of relatedness, trust and obligation endure through successive generations. The image is radical, for a changed life is fundamentally assumed; and it is dynamic for progress and development are of the essence. … Discipleship is expressed in an obedience that is righteous and loving, even of enemies, to the point of one's own death. It thus supplies a new paradigm for the old one of legal righteousness. The term … takes the serving disciple into the Way that crosses from here and now to the glory of the Kingdom.[172]

Michael Wilkins, among many others, has undertaken a detailed study of the biblical theology of discipleship.[173] While studies like his provide an illuminating understanding of what discipleship meant in New Testament times, the term has now assumed a more general connotation of living as a committed Christian. There are many books and programs, some more practical, some more academic, which explore this modern concept of discipleship.

Discipleship is often seen as a step further than Christian faith. For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains the difference between grace and discipleship: "cheap grace means the justification of sin without justification of the sinner … [where] the world goes on in the

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[171] Leland Ryken, James C Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, "Discipleship," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 208-209.
[172] Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman III, "Discipleship," 208.
[173] Michael J Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992).

same old way… cheap grace is grace without discipleship."[174] He contrasts this with costly grace: "Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a person must knock. … Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ."[175]

Like many others, Bonhoeffer believes that discipleship involves a radical change towards following the teachings of Christ in all we do. The next section explores this concept of discipleship in relationship to non-human creation, what is referred to here as ecological discipleship.

In his PhD thesis, Craig Mitchell investigates Christian disciples, and in particular mission-oriented disciples, and he identifies Christian education as the process of forming such mission-shaped disciples.[176] After interviewing congregational ministers in the Uniting Church of Australia, he concludes:

> The key conclusion of this study is that the intentional (re)forming of congregational Christian formation and education is core ecclesial praxis for growing mission-shaped disciples. Rather than being another mere set of church activities, intentional processes and environments for growing disciples are part of the Spirit's constant guidance, inspiration, and renewal of the people of God. Notwithstanding other definitions of Christian education, I suggest that forming mature disciples of Jesus Christ is not primarily an internal aim of the church but an integral aspect, a core praxis, of its participation in God's mission. Discipleship is an outcome of Christian formation and education, not a replacement for them. [177]

Mitchell's work implies that if ecological discipleship is to be incorporated as part of a congregation's mission, then it also needs to be incorporated into its program of Christian education and lifelong learning.

A search of published work on discipleship in the past decade shows two key themes in the literature. First, there are many guides for Christians to become better disciples using different methods and approaches, for example, Bill Hull's work as part of the Navigators

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[174] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1937), 44.
[175] Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 45.
[176] Craig Mitchell, "(Re) Forming Christian Education in Congregations as the Praxis of Growing Disciples for a Missional Church" (PhD Flinders University of South Australia, College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, 2018).
[177] Mitchell, "(Re) Forming Christian Education in Congregations as the Praxis of Growing Disciples for a Missional Church," 305.

discipleship organisation.[178] A majority of these guides focus particularly on biblical models of discipleship, especially models used by Jesus. Examples include works by Greg Ogden and Michael Wilkins.[179] Second, there are reflections on the success of different individual discipleship programs, which are often then presented as templates for wider adoption. Examples include Paul Sparks et al,[180] Roger Walton[181] and Steve Murrell.[182]

There is limited work that seeks to analyse critically and objectively either the relative success of different discipleship programs or to identify analytically the best ways to move from theological understanding to active community engagement as disciples. This suggests that any analysis of the usefulness of the new approaches proposed in this thesis will be somewhat subjective, rather than being based on a well-recognised analytic framework.

### 2.7.2 Christian Social Ethics and Discipleship

Ethics is the study of what should be done – what are right actions and wrong actions. Christian ethics investigates the question of what should be done in the context of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Christian discipleship is the act of choosing a lifestyle that is based on the teachings of Jesus, and inevitably includes consideration of what one should do. Yet these two areas of ethics and discipleship are not often explicitly considered together.

Patricia Schoelles describes this disconnect between discipleship and social ethics, suggesting that these are often seen as two completely unrelated parts of the Christian life, concluding "Yet it is my contention that discipleship can actually inform social ethics in important ways."[183] While one might question whether most Christians do consider these completely unrelated aspects of life, it is certainly true that these two areas are not often considered part of the same continuum of answering the question "what should I, as a Christian, do"?

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[178] Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2014).
[179] Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).
Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).
Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship*.
[180] Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight J Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).
[181] Roger Walton, "Disciples Together: The Small Group as a Vehicle for Discipleship Formation," *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 8, no. 2 (2011).
[182] Steve Murrell, *Wikichurch: Making Discipleship Engaging, Empowering, and Viral* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma Media, 2011).
[183] Patricia A Schoelles, "Discipleship and Social Ethics: Defining Boundaries for the Church of the Diaspora," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 9 (1989): 187.

There are several reasons for this disconnect. At least from the time of the Reformation and counter-reformation, there has been an emphasis on personal salvation as being a gift of grace, rather than any product of works ("what we do"). Action in the world is seen as a response to salvation, and theologians can be reluctant to make claims about what we must do. Much of Christian ethics, especially in modern times, has been a discussion of whether particular actions or systems (abortion, fertility, euthanasia, marriage, war, capitalism, communism) are right or wrong, to ensure that we avoid the wrong. The Ten Commandments include two positive commandments (remember the sabbath, honour your mother and father) and eight "thou shalt not" commandments.

By contrast, discussions of discipleship concentrate on what should be done, but often with a particular emphasis on the inner life – praying, reading scripture, worshipping, and meeting in community. Where there is a discussion of action in the world as part of discipleship, often the emphasis is on making and supporting new disciples.

Neither of these approaches is particularly helpful to Christians who wish to understand how to work towards a better world. As Powell, Mulder and Griffin describe in their analysis of what engages young people in congregations: "Young people want to know not only what they are saved *from* but what they are saved *for*. They want to take action, not just hear about what they can't do. Participation and challenge are two central features of churches growing young."[184]

The links between these areas seem clear – a life dedicated to following Jesus should be a life that makes a difference in the world. Some prominent authors have addressed exactly this question, linking ethics and discipleship.

As mentioned earlier, Bonhoeffer explains discipleship in terms of complete surrender to Christ, using his concept of costly grace.[185] He then links ethical action to this life in Christ: "The hearer of the word who is not at the same time the doer of the word thus inevitably falls victim to self-deception."[186] Bonhoeffer argues that discipleship should be visible through ethical actions, and that actions are only ethical when they are done as a disciple of Christ submitting to God's will, not based on one's own concepts of good and evil. Discipleship is

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[184] Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 141.
[185]Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 45.
[186] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (London, UK: SCM Press, 1955), 27.

the precursor to ethical action, but it is an immediate precursor – discipleship leads immediately to actions of love for God and neighbour.

Like Bonhoeffer, John Metz writes about what he sees as a crisis in the Church in the way that it deals with the world around it.[187] He describes the role of political theology, which is a deprivatisation of faith. Rather than faith, and by implication discipleship, being a personal, existential, salvific matter, instead it should be a force that operates within society and the world.[188]

This thesis looks at the ethical question of caring for creation and links this to Christian discipleship by incorporating a framework for environmental reflection of scripture to Christian discipleship education. The work of Bonhoeffer and Metz suggests that there are good reasons for linking discipleship and ethical behaviour.

### 2.7.3 Ecological Discipleship

Modern interest in eco-theology has been driven by the current environmental crisis and the need to act to restore a just relationship with Earth. As such, it is eminently practical theology. The goals are not simply to derive some propositional statements about issues like a doctrine of creation. Instead, the goal is to radically change the relationship between humanity (particularly affluent, urbanised, first-world humanity) and creation. This underlying change in attitude is seen as an integral part of Christian discipleship. It is worth confirming that the term "ecological discipleship" does not mean being a disciple of nature or ecology, instead, it means those aspects of being a Christian disciple that involve our relationship with the rest of creation, particularly in the light of the ecological crisis.

It is useful to look at writers who have emphasised this notion of ecological discipleship. Sallie McFague was a feminist theologian and eco-theologian who explored different metaphors as ways of speaking about God. Her eco-theology uses the metaphor of creation as the body of God, as a way of disorienting and reorienting our relationship to creation:

> In what ways would we think of the relationship between God and the world were we to experiment with the metaphor of the universe as God's 'body,' God's palpable presence in all space and time? If what is needed in our ecological, nuclear age is

[187] John B. Metz, "Religion and Society in the Light of a Political Theology," *The Harvard Theological Review* 61, no. 4 (1968).
[188] Metz, "Religion and Society in the Light of a Political Theology," 513.

> an imaginative vision of the relationship between God and the world that underscores their interdependence and mutuality, empowering a sensibility of care and responsibility toward all life, how would it help to see the world as the body of God?[189]

She suggests that this model of creation as God's body "embraces both the guts and the glory, both the mud and the mystery – or, more precisely, suggests that the peculiar form of divine available to us if we live within this model, is only through the guts, the mud."[190] Her call for ecological discipleship starts with the fact that humans are embodied creatures. We don't just have a body distinct from our mind or spirit or soul –we are our bodies. As creatures living embodied as part of an interwoven creation, we are called to know and love nature: "Christian practice, loving God and neighbour *as subjects*, as worthy of our love in and for themselves, should be extended to nature."[191] Just as Christian discipleship seeks to care for the poor and oppressed neighbour, this is naturally extended to love and care for a suffering creation.

McFague explains that discipleship implies action:

> Christian discipleship in our time, if it is to express love for God and for the earth, must be one of self-limitation, sacrifice, and sharing so that the neighbours, all God's creatures, might flourish. Christians are called, I believe, not only to embody an alternative vision of the abundant life, but also to help move our social, political, and financial institutions in this direction.[192]

Her key point here is that it is not enough to just love nature and wish to care for it. In the light of the ecological crisis, ecological discipleship requires a radical lifestyle change to consume much less.

Bouma-Prediger also takes a very practical approach to ecological virtues and includes an analysis of different ways in which these virtues can be nurtured and developed as part of caring for creation.[193] His examples of ecological discipleship are largely drawn from educational settings in schools, colleges, and religious communities. In the case of secular

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[189] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 60.
[190] Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1993), 135.
[191] Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1997), 1.
[192] McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*, 115.
[193] Bouma-Prediger, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic*.

programs, the expression of these virtues is not called discipleship but instead is seen as being good and responsible citizens of this planet. Nevertheless, the goal is the same – to encourage care for creation.

### 2.7.4 Watershed Discipleship

Ched Myers proposed the term "watershed discipleship" as an expression of ecological discipleship, incorporating principles of resistance and renewal:

> This framing discourse is an intentional "triple entendre":
>
> 1. It recognizes that we are in a *watershed historical moment of crisis*, which demands that environmental and social justice and sustainability be integral to everything we do as Christians and citizen inhabitants of specific places;
>
> 2. It acknowledges the bioregional locus of an incarnational following of Jesus: our individual discipleship and the life and witness of the local church take place inescapably *in a watershed context;*
>
> 3. And it implies that we need to be *disciples of our watersheds*.[194]

The first of these three points recognizes an imperative to act. The second point recognizes that our practical actions should be thoughtfully directed towards our local area. The final point is that there is not a single best action, but rather our actions should be influenced (or as disciples, taught) by the local environment and the traditional inhabitants of this environment.

Cherice Bock surveys a number of promoters of watershed discipleship to identify strategies that are effective for improving ecological discipleship amongst Christian communities.[195] Bock identifies eight key rhetorical strategies used by watershed practitioners to improve ecological discipleship of individuals and congregations.

(i) **Praxis** – When approaching biblical texts, watershed practitioners look for reflections of the textual themes in their lived experience in their own watershed.

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[194] Ched Myers, ed., *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 2.
[195] Bock, "Watershed Discipleship: Communicating Climate Change within a Christian Framework: A Case Study Analysis."

(ii) **Recovering Traditional ecological Knowledge in Scripture.** This focusses on ancient practices such as Sabbath and Jubilee "which encourage right relationship with one's community, land, animals, those outside one's community and God."[196]

(iii) **Learning Social-Ecological Memories**. This implies recovering ecological images in scripture, such as the river of life, or what Myers calls Redemption as Rehydration.[197]

(iv) **Environmental Justice** This involves learning about historical and present-day local environmental issues and working towards remedying them.

(v) **Re-placing and reinhabiting**. This involves solidarity with communities that are impacted by environmental degradation. Reinhabiting recognizes that discipleship involves actively inhabiting a space and caring for that locality.

(vi) **Social-ecological systems and services**. This involves understanding the complex interconnections between social and economic systems and the ecological systems, for example by supporting local, sustainable agriculture.

(vii) **Biblical rhetorical style.** This means framing ecological issues in terms of commonly understood biblical motifs such as prayer, psalms, laments and prophesy It also involves a prophetic ministry of speaking truth to power by highlighting environmental injustice.

(viii) **Christian language.** This focuses on terms such as creation, confession, forgiveness, salvation, and redemption, which are terms common to Christians, although often restricted to concerns about humans. It involves using concepts and stories from the Bible to draw ecological meaning and truth.

Bock also identifies two symbolic actions that enhance ecological awareness and discipleship.

(ix) **Liturgical rhythms allow movement toward pro-environmental behaviour**. While many people may express fear, dismay, anxiety or grief around the ecological crisis, Christians are uniquely equipped with tools to express these through liturgies of lament, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

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[196] Bock, "Watershed Discipleship: Communicating Climate Change within a Christian Framework: A Case Study Analysis," 168.
[197] Ched Myers, "Prophetic Visions of Redemption as Rehydration: A Call to Watershed Discipleship," *Anglican Theological Review* 100, no. 1 (2018).

(x) **Localizing the Liturgy**. This involves tying the rites and sacraments of Christian worship more tightly into the local community. Examples might be baptisms in a local river, communion using locally grown produce, or worship services outside amongst creation.

Since these ten themes have been demonstrated to encourage and support ecological discipleship, they will later be used to analyse the usefulness of new ecological discipleship resources developed as part of this thesis.

### 2.7.5 Discipleship Small Groups

Small groups are now a common feature of western society. As social beings, much of life is lived in groups. Once businesses grow beyond a certain size, the workforce is divided, usually hierarchically, into teams, departments, and divisions. At the lowest level, workers are commonly part of a team or "small group" of workers. Social activities are very often group-based, whether it is a sporting team, a book club, or charitable organisations. These groups are of a size where members all know each other, interact regularly, and provide mutual support.

Small groups are now common in many churches. In some cases, the group might have a specific focus, such as a worship band, a choir, or a craft group. Its membership may be targeted towards a particular demographic, such as a young couples' group, or a retirees' picnic group. Many small groups have a primary focus on Christian education and faith encouragement, meeting regularly (commonly weekly, fortnightly, or monthly), often in members' homes and incorporating Bible study, discussions, mutual support, testimonies, and prayer. I will refer to these as *discipleship small groups*, to distinguish them from other secular or religious small groups.

Writing in 1994, Robert Wuthnow undertook a detailed sociological study of small groups, and he concluded that are a key component of western society (explicitly, American society).

> At present, four out of every ten Americans belong to a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for its members. These are not simply informal gatherings of neighbours and friends, but organized groups: Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step groups, youth groups and singles groups, book discussion clubs, sports, and hobby groups, and political or civic groups. …In an era when television networks and national newspapers increasingly define what is important, it is easy to dismiss the small group phenomenon entirely. To overlook this trend, however, would be a mistake.

> The small-group movement has been effecting a quiet revolution in American society.[198]

Atkinson gives six reasons why such small groups are beneficial to churches. [199] They provide a sense of community for members; they assist in people's quest for spirituality; they provide an entry point into the church; they provide a safe learning environment; they support the study of scripture and doctrine and they are effective in mobilizing the laity for ministry.

Harley Walton reviews discipleship small groups in churches in North-East England. He acknowledges many positive qualities of such groups:

> There are very good reasons for promoting small groups as a vehicle for discipleship formation. They give a space for the construction of faith thinking, they provide support and care, they can empower all-member ministry and they encourage engagement with the Scriptures. In small groups people learn to talk about their faith, gain confidence in praying, discover gifts and help each other keep alive a worldview that is widely dismissed and eroded in the western world.[200]

However, he also finds that while they can provide mutual encouragement and support, many small groups are problematic in their approach to Christian education. By valuing the opinions of all and being encouraging and supportive, such groups prioritize personal growth and experience above action in the world, and they promote a personalised understanding of scripture often with limited engagement with traditional sources of interpretation.[201] Such analysis suggests that challenging, well-structured Christian discipleship resources can encourage such engagement with scripture.

Lisa Withrow sees a similar challenge for growing disciples in small groups.

> One danger with small groups that offer little more than personal and social support is that the group dynamic can develop a homeostatic quality. In other words, the raison d'être of the group can unwittingly become to provide individuals with a "comfortable space." When this happens, groups are often quite resistant to significant individual or corporate change. The internal culture of the group centres

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[198] Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 2.
[199] Harley T Atkinson, *The Power of Small Groups in Christian Formation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 4.
[200] Walton, "Disciples Together: The Small Group as a Vehicle for Discipleship Formation," 112-113.
[201] Walton, "Disciples Together: The Small Group as a Vehicle for Discipleship Formation," 113.

> on the "comfort" of its members, making formal or informal input from outside the group very difficult. Further, once group members have built a history of sharing their personal narratives and of affirming one another, the function of the group's culture is often to make members "feel good" about themselves. Not surprisingly, such a group no longer is open to spiritual challenge and accountability.[202]

Withrow's observations suggest that challenging and well-structured discipleship resources could be useful to lead such groups from contemplation and self-support to action that makes a difference in the world.

If small groups have the potential to be one of the foremost vehicles for growing and equipping Christian disciples, then they should equally be one of the foremost vehicles for growing and equipping ecological discipleship. In fact, many of the features of small groups are well aligned with educational models of adult learners, where transformative learning is supported by a caring and sharing community of enquiry.[203] So small group resources for ecological discipleship can be a significant contributor to a more vigorous church response to the ecological crisis at the individual and congregational level.

There appears to be a dearth of ecologically oriented small group study material. As an example, Open Life Church host a web-based resource for churches.[204] Their small group study resources page lists more than 150 study guides. Many are based on the study of individual books of the Bible. Approximately one-third address topical issues such as addiction, marriage, divorce, financial matters, and leadership. None of the studies explicitly addresses ecological issues. *Counter Culture* is marketed as a set of small group Bible studies that address key contemporary social issues – the issues covered are poverty, same-sex marriage, racism, sex slavery, immigration, persecution, abortion, orphans and pornography, but nothing about creation-care.[205] While these are just a couple of examples, more extensive Internet searches have not uncovered any significant small group studies in the area of care for creation, suggesting that there is scope for work in this area.

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[202] Lisa R Withrow, "Disciples for the Future: Small Groups and Vital Faith Development," *Quarterly Review-Nashville-United Methodist Publishing House* 23, no. 2 (2003): 142.
[203] Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Boss, 2006).
[204] Life Church, "Small Groups," 2021, accessed 28 July 2021, https://open.life.church/categories/319-small-groups.
[205] David Platt, *Counter Culture: Following Christ in an Anti-Christian Age* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2017).

## 2.8 Summary

This chapter has reviewed a range of topics that form the foundation for the thesis.

Section 2.1 outlines the nature of the current ecological crisis and section 2.2 gives examples of the strong calls for action by Church leaders that seem to have had limited success in mobilising the Church to care for creation. Sections 2.3 and 2.4 summarise the history of hermeneutics and exegesis as they relate to scripture. Some existing ecological hermeneutical methods are described in section 2.5. The ecological readings to be developed in this thesis will later need to be situated within the existing tradition of biblical scholarship and also be shown to be an original contribution to ecological readings. Section 2.6 deals with environmental ethics as it sits within the broader field of moral philosophy. Particular attention is paid to Virtue Ethics, which will be the ethical framework used in this thesis, and existing work in Christian Environmental Ethics is also surveyed. Section 2.7 deals with the topic of ecological discipleship. An example of current best practice in ecological discipleship, Myers' Watershed Discipleship, is described. The proposed method for deploying the newly proposed interpretive technique is within a broader set of creation care Bible studies suitable for use in discipleship small groups and so the purpose and role of these small groups are reviewed.

The next chapter will analyse the state-of-the-art in this broad span of topics, identifying research gaps that current research has not yet explored, and this will inform the research to be undertaken in this thesis.

# Chapter 3 Research Proposal

## 3.1 Gap Analysis

The environmental crisis remains a major ethical issue for contemporary society. The crisis involves several significant, interrelated social issues. Climate change is exacerbated by the continued greenhouse gas emissions from burning fossil fuels for transportation and energy production. Air, sea, and land pollution are caused by the use of toxic materials such as plastics without adequate consideration of their safe disposal. Deforestation and species extinction are symptoms of increasing proportions of land being devoted to agriculture, grazing and mining.

Intellectually, the above problems and the most effective solutions are well understood, including approaches such as alternative energy sources, circular economies that reuse and recycle rather than dispose of manufactured goods, and more plant-based food sources that use fewer agricultural resources. The problem that ethicists and policy makers grapple with is why the solutions are not more vigorously pursued. While many Christian leaders have ardently called for urgent ecological action, there is little evidence that Christians are particularly more environmentally aware or more active in creation care than the population in general.[206]

As discussed in section 2.5.6, an Integral Ecology approach to environmental problems requires more than scientific facts about these problems and resulting technological solutions. This thesis uses reflection on scripture to both identify universal moral and spiritual aspects of the human condition that affect humanity's relationship with creation and also to motivate subsequent action to live more sustainably. These universal aspects of the human condition equally impact associated issues like global poverty and injustice. As such, this thesis contributes to the active research community in Integral Ecology.

This thesis is motivated by a desire to find ways to engage Christians in understanding the ecological crisis and in more actively participating in creation care. If ecological discipleship

[206] David M Konisky, "The Greening of Christianity? A Study of Environmental Attitudes over Time," *Environmental Politics* 27, no. 2 (2018). David Konisky's conclusion in this paper is that as a whole, Christians are less concerned about environmental protection than their non-religious peers, and based on Gallup poll results, this concern did not increase between 1990 and 2015.

is understood as how Christian disciples (i.e., followers of Christ) acknowledge and incorporate care for creation as a fundamental aspect of their lives, then this thesis aims to encourage and support ecological discipleship.

### 3.1.1 Scripture as a Basis for Discipleship

As a sacred text, the Bible is a major source of ethical guidance for Christians. By engagement with scripture, Christians explore their understanding of ethical behaviour through different literary genres, including narrative, laws, epistles, poetry, and parables. The Bible has some key texts which explicitly deal with humanity's relationship with non-human creation but a much larger proportion of scripture deals with discussions of human nature, interpersonal relationships, and the relationship between God and humankind. If scripture is to be a valuable resource for ecological reflection, then it would be useful to find techniques where a larger proportion of texts can be used for meditation on ecological issues.

A common technique for emphasising some aspects of scripture and de-emphasising other aspects is the use of an interpretive lens or a hermeneutical key. For example, the Earth Bible Project uses a hermeneutical process based on liberation theology ideas of (ecological) suspicion, identification and retrieval. [207] Conradie uses "Earth as the household of God" as a hermeneutical key, while Marlow uses the ecological triangle (God – human – creation).[208] The use of such interpretive lenses works best for texts that have an explicit ecological message – for example, what Habel refers to as "green" (ecologically positive) and "grey" (ecologically negative) texts.[209] When ecological readings are applied more broadly to texts without an obvious ecological message, then the interpretations can be quite speculative.[210] Because of the limited number of explicit ecological scriptural passages, these existing

[207] Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics." 4-5. Habel summarises these hermeneutical steps as follows: "suspicion that the text is likely to be inherently anthropocentric or read from an anthropocentric perspective." "Identification with Earth and members of Earth community raises our consciousness to injustices against the Earth in the text." "Discerning Earth and members of Earth community as subjects with a voice is a key part of the retrieval process."
[208] Conradie, *The Earth in God's Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective*. Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*.
[209] Habel, *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?*
[210] David G Horrell, "Ecological Hermeneutics: Reflections on Methods and Prospects for the Future," *Colloquium: The Australian and New Zealand Theological Review* 46, 2 (2014).

techniques are either only able to be applied to explicitly ecological texts, or are unduly speculative in their interpretation of a larger body of texts.[211]

There is therefore a research gap for identifying techniques for more widely using scripture for ecological reflection while being consistent with broadly accepted hermeneutical techniques. A novel two-step method for reading scripture ecologically is proposed in this thesis. This method is based on the ethical concepts of virtues and vices, i.e., good and bad ethical behaviour. There are many scriptural texts which deal with human virtues and vices. The classical cardinal and theological virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, justice, faith, hope and love, and their corresponding vices of excess, deficiency, and misdirection, run as themes through many, many biblical passages.

The Bible is a complex document, and it is not, in itself, a collection of writings describing what is ethical behaviour, or how to live an ethical life. Rather the Bible contains the stories of many complex characters whose behaviour demonstrates both virtues and vices. In the OT, for example, Jacob steals the birthright from Esau yet is chosen by God as the patriarch of his people.[212] In the NT, Peter is variously courageous and cowardly. Nevertheless, the authoritative status of the Bible means that these characters, in all their complexity, are valuable as a basis for ethical reflection.

The proposed eco-virtues interpretive technique proceeds after the primary meaning of the text has been considered through conventional exegesis. The first step in the eco-virtues interpretation is focussed on the world of the text, examining the motivations and actions of the characters and identifying the virtues and vices that appear in the text, looking for what they reveal about the characters and storylines in that text. For example, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, this would include identifying the vices that lead to the younger son's fall and also identifying the virtues that lead to his restoration.

The second step goes beyond the original meaning of the text, to look at how these virtues and vices are evident in current social issues. Here the goal is not to uncover the original

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[211] As mentioned in section 2.5.3, Marlow restricts her analysis to biblical passages that have strong descriptions of a suffering creation or a restored creation. Habel describes "green" and "grey" texts which directly address Earth, but there is less scope to apply the EBP hermeneutical process to texts which do not address Earth. In some cases, EBP analysis seeks to recover the voice of Earth even when it is not present, which by its nature can be quite speculative.

[212] This conflict between Jacob and Esau forms part of the complex history between Israel and Edom evident in the book of Obadiah, to be investigated in Chapter 5.

intended meaning of the text (exegesis). Rather it is to use the text, and in particular, the virtues and vices exhibited in the text, to reflect on contemporary social issues (hermeneutical reflection). In the case of this thesis, virtues and vices are examined in the light of the humanity's relationship with creation. Again, using the example of the Prodigal Son, one would ask how those same vices that caused the son's fall have contributed to our modern broken relationship with creation, and how those same virtues that restored the son's relationship with his family might be applied to restoring our relationship to creation.[213] These two steps can culminate in the discussion of the contemporary application of the passage.

The use of virtues and vices to link ancient biblical stories to the modern problems of human-creation relationships is, I believe, an original idea that has not previously been mooted or explored and has potentially significant contributions to theological reflection.

There are two broad approaches that could be used in investigating ecological virtues and vices in scripture. The first approach is to examine virtues and vices across the broad sweep of scripture, and then apply these virtues and vices to our understanding of creation care. Such an approach has already been used by writers such as Steven Bouma-Prediger, Celia Deane-Drummond and Louke van Wensveen as described in the previous chapter.[214] This could be equated to a systematic theology of ecological virtues as they appear throughout scripture.

The second approach, to be used in this thesis, is to focus on the ecological application of virtues and vices as they emerge in individual biblical passages. This could be equated to a biblical studies approach to ecological virtues. Rather than looking at virtues and vices as they appear throughout the span of scripture, this approach focusses on individual examples of behaviour. Just as reflecting on individual texts can expand and deepen our understanding of key theological doctrines, so reflecting on ecological virtues in individual texts can make our ecological ethical understandings more concrete.

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[213] This same reflective process could be used more generally in Christian formation for ethical reflection on other topical issues, such as reconciliation with First Nations people, or global inequality. In this thesis, it is restricted to creation care. The Future Work section of Chapter 7 examines other possible uses in a little more detail.

[214] Bouma-Prediger, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic*.
Deane-Drummond, *The Ethics of Nature*.
van Wensveen, "Cardinal Environmental Virtues: A Neurobiological Perspective."

It is the contention of this thesis that such investigations of individual texts can provide new and more specific eco-theological insights than have been identified by existing scripture-wide investigations.

### 3.1.2 Christian Discipleship and Eco-theology

Christian environmental ethics is, at its heart, a practical discipline that explores how humanity should exercise our role as responsible stewards of God's creation. Therefore, the proposed scriptural reflection described in the previous section is most useful if it is used as the basis for encouraging such responsible stewardship. Christian ecological discipleship is manifested in those parts of a life of following Jesus which relate to our active respect for, love of, and care for creation.

As described earlier, discipleship small groups have great potential for encouraging and supporting Christian discipleship in general, and so it follows that they also have great potential for encouraging ecological discipleship through targeted Christian education activities in creation care. Bible study is a key vehicle for Christian education, including within discipleship small groups. However, there is a dearth of creation-care Bible study material available which is designed for small groups.

To make the new interpretive technique based on virtues and vices available as a tool for ecological discipleship formation, a small set of example Bible studies will be developed. The potential usefulness of these studies can be analysed by comparing their content and potential reception to Bock's characteristics of successful watershed discipleship programs.[215]

## 3.2 Research Questions

Having analysed the above research gaps, and outlined the broad directions of the research, the following two research questions are proposed.

***Research Question 1. How can the principles of Virtue Ethics be used as an interpretive lens for exploring ecological wisdom in a variety of biblical genres?***

To be useful to both congregational and academic settings, this new interpretive technique should fit within the contemporary traditions of biblical reflection, as explained in the earlier

[215] Bock, "Watershed Discipleship: Communicating Climate Change within a Christian Framework: A Case Study Analysis."

sections on hermeneutics in general and ecological hermeneutics in particular. Additionally, the approach will be more useful if it can be applied to a wider range of biblical texts, including those without explicit ecological themes. Given the expected use of this technique, it should also be able to be used as the basis for ecological discipleship formation, which leads to the second research question.

***Research Question 2. How well do small group Bible study resources based on this interpretive method align with existing best-practice in ecological discipleship formation?***

One way of making use of the new interpretive techniques developed in the first research question is to use this new technique in the design of small group Bible studies, which are known to be an important component of adult Christian education. While the end goal of such Christian education is to encourage better care for creation among Christian communities, quantitatively measuring the effectiveness of such programs in terms of changed behaviour is not possible within the scope of a Master's project. This is because such changes are long-term and isolating the influence of one set of Bible studies amongst broader Christian discipleship formation is problematic.

Instead, a more practical and achievable research goal is to examine the alignment of a set of Bible studies based on ecological virtues and vices with the current best practice in ecological discipleship programs.

## 3.3 Research Methodology

### 3.3.1 A Proposed New Interpretive Method

The goal of this project is to develop an effective biblical interpretive technique for ecological reflection that is suitable for application in adult Christian education settings. In the context of a research thesis, it is important that this interpretive technique should be situated in the context of current best practice. Therefore, care must be taken to avoid unsupported speculative interpretations, for example through the use of fanciful analogies or allegories. One needs to avoid "eisegesis" that would result from taking an existing ecological viewpoint and projecting that back into the original text.

To avoid these difficulties, the two-step process outlined above is proposed. After an exegesis of the original meaning of the text, the first eco-virtues step examines the world of the text, looking for virtues and vices. Such a step does not mean treating the text in isolation

or out of its literary, cultural, or theological context. Meaning is also contingent on the social, psychological, cultural, and historical context of the interpreter and meaning is always subjective to some degree. So instead, the goal is to be as objective as possible. This can mean explicitly acknowledging the viewpoints and assumptions of the interpreter, as well as testing and refining the extracted meaning within a community of interpreters.[216]

A common hermeneutical tool is the interpretive lens which focuses on some parts of the text while paying less attention to others. Often, the full meaning of a text is best understood when a variety of techniques (i.e., a suite of different interpretive lenses) are applied. For example, source criticism looks at the process of the composition of the received text, including identifying sections of the text which are later redactions of the original text. Historical criticism looks at the meaning of the text in its original historical and social setting. Canonical criticism looks at the function of the text in its relationship to other parts of scripture. Narrative criticism looks at how the elements of a text are composed into a meaningful whole, including the purpose of characters, background, plot development and climax. Literary criticism applies the tools of modern literary theory, treating the text as literature. Combining all these gives a fuller understanding of the text. Adding a new interpretive lens can further aid understanding.[217]

For this analysis, a new interpretive lens is proposed which is based on virtues and vices. In terms of existing categories of biblical criticism, this technique best fits in the category of ideological criticism, since it is motivated by the current ecological crisis. The technique concentrates on the actions of the different actors in the text (which might be individuals, groups, or whole nations). The technique seeks to identify which virtues and vices are evident in the thoughts and actions of different actors in the text, and the context and motivation within which these virtuous or vicious actions occur. The motivation may include consideration of the social and cultural context.

As an example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the caring passer-by shows love for his neighbour, shows courage in stopping in an area where robbers operate, shows generosity in paying for the injured traveller's care and wisdom in ensuring that care is continued if the

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[216] Acknowledging, of course, that every community of interpreters has its own cultural, social, historical, and traditional biases which may be even harder to identify and acknowledge.

[217] The goal of Bible studies based on the eco-virtues technique is not to undertake a new exegesis of the text. It is assumed that the text has been previously analysed for its historical meaning. The eco-virtues analysis of the texts moves from this existing understanding to identify virtues and vices as they appear in the text.

payment is exhausted. This is in the context of cultural enmity, a broken journey, and the unlikelihood that such a gesture would be reciprocated, and it is also in the theological context of the parable answering the question of "who is my neighbour?"

Note that this first stage of analysis concentrates on the world of the text by identifying virtues and vices as expressed in the text. This will necessarily include both ancient understandings of morality (the world behind the text) and it will be influenced by current understandings of morality (the world in front of the text) but these are done in terms of the original narrative, not in terms of the current issue of creation care. To make moral connections to creation care a second application step is required.

In Bible study, exegesis is often followed by an application step. In the medieval approach based on the fourfold meaning of scripture, exegesis corresponds most closely to the literal meaning of scripture, while the application step corresponds to the extended meanings about beliefs and dogma (allegorical sense), Christian living (moral sense) and eschatological concerns (anagogical sense). In more recent practice, historical-critical exegesis identifies the likely intended meaning at the time the text was written, while the hermeneutical step looks at what the text might mean now so that application can be made of the ancient text to the contemporary world.

For the eco-virtues scripture readings, this second step takes the virtues and vices identified in the first step, and it reflects on how those same virtues and vices are evident in humanity's current relationship with creation. Again, using the Good Samaritan story as an example, the neighbourly love of the Samaritan required courage to overcome the cultural norms of tribal hatred, while today action showing neighbourly love in the form of care for creation may require courage to overcome cultural norms about the subservient role of non-human creation.[218]

As mentioned earlier, Conradie argues that for ecological hermeneutics, the key step is one of re-appropriation, i.e., linking (ancient) text and (contemporary) context. It is an imaginative

[218] Extending the biblical concept of "love for neighbour" to also mean love for non-human neighbours, and indeed to all creation, is a common theme in many eco-theological writings. For an extended discussion of this issue, see Jakob Signäs, "Who Is Thy Neighbour? : On Posthumanism, Responsibility and Interconnected Solidarity," *Approaching Religion* 10, no. 2 (2020), https://journal.fi/ar/article/view/91237.

task of searching for the similar among the dissimilar.[219] Here, virtues and vices provide the mechanism for such re-appropriation.

### 3.3.2 Research Plan and Methodological Considerations

The research plan is based on two main phases, corresponding to the two research questions.

The first phase is largely analytical. The two-step interpretive technique (identification of virtues/vices and ecological application) will be applied to two biblical texts to identify new ecological insights from scripture and to compare these insights with existing interpretations of the same texts to ensure that the insights represent novel connections between well-known biblical texts and current understandings of moral aspects of the ecological crisis.

The process for each text begins with a review of the history of interpretation of the text, with special attention to any ecological interpretations. Next, the text is analysed in detail to identify the virtues and vices implied by the thoughts and actions in the passage, with particular attention to the context in which these virtues and vices appear and including the functions of these virtues and vices in the original meaning of the text.

After identification of virtues and vices, the application step re-appropriates these contextualised virtues and vices to the modern problem of the ecological crisis. This is a process of imaginative reflection on universal human traits which can potentially provide new insights into the reasons for the current ecological crisis, new insights into the reasons for humanity's reluctance to address the current crisis with sufficient vigour, and new encouragement for transformed ecological discipleship at individual, community, and national levels. The final step in answering the first research question is a critical examination of the potential usefulness of the proposed new technique in identifying new ecological insights.

One important decision will be the selection of example biblical texts for analysis using the eco-virtues approach. Useful characteristics for texts that will best demonstrate the utility of the proposed technique are that the texts should be rich in virtues and vices, that the texts should represent different literary genres, that the texts are *not* rich in overt ecological imagery, and that each text should represent a complete coherent pericope.

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[219] Conradie, "What on Earth Is an Ecological Hermeneutics? Some Broad Parameters."

Note that it is not intended that the chosen texts need to exhibit all of the different virtues and vices, and it is not intended that the two chosen texts are sufficient to develop a complete doctrine of creation care. Just as one biblical passage is insufficient to develop a complete theological doctrine, such as a doctrine of salvation, so a small number of texts will not explore all of the biblical wisdom about creation care. In terms of the exploration of the research questions in this thesis, the chosen texts are useful examples. One could equally choose many other texts to explore, and other possible biblical genres are listed in future work in Chapter 8.

The texts that have been chosen to meet these characteristics are the NT parable of the Prodigal Son and the OT prophetic book of Obadiah. More detailed justifications for the choice of texts will be provided at the start of their analyses.

The second phase of the research program addresses the second research question about how to evaluate the incorporation of the new interpretive technique into ecological discipleship programs, in particular small group Bible studies.

The design of the Bible studies will be based on typical discipleship small-group Bible study processes of relatively open-ended group responses and discussions to stimulus questions. The goal of this second research question is then to evaluate the effectiveness of the new interpretive method in encouraging ecological discipleship particularly in the context of small group Bible studies.

As mentioned earlier, quantitative evaluation of the contribution of one discipleship resource to long-term changes in creation-care attitudes and actions is impractical, if not impossible, especially within the scope of a Master's research program. Instead, existing work by Bock in identifying the characteristics of effective ecological discipleship programs will be used to evaluate the potential of the newly developed ecological discipleship resources.[220] Even this evaluation is necessarily limited and subjective given that is based on analysis by the author of the Bible study materials rather than some more objective analysis of the way in which the Bible studies are delivered by a facilitator and received by the study participants.

[220] Bock, "Watershed Discipleship: Communicating Climate Change within a Christian Framework: A Case Study Analysis."

# Chapter 4 An Eco-Virtues Reading of Luke 15:11-32

## 4.1 The Text for Interpretation

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) will be the first text examined using the eco-virtues approach. The analysis will be based on the NRSV version of the text.[221] The original Greek text has only minor textual variants which do not affect the virtues-based reading.[222]

This text has been chosen because it is well-known with a long history of interpretation, and this provides a familiar story that will then be viewed from a novel perspective. The story is rich in virtues and vices, and the broad theme of the healing of broken relationships is consistent with the modern task of restoring right relationships between humanity and creation. The story is self-contained but sufficiently detailed to allow for an appropriate level of analysis. Parables have a long history of imaginative reflection and contextualised application to contemporary problems, and this analysis continues this tradition.

The rest of this chapter will first provide a summary of the literary and social context of the parable, but it is assumed that the parable is well-known to readers. Next, a history of interpretation of the parable will be given, followed by the new eco-virtues reading, including textual and application steps. Analysis of the usefulness of the new method concludes the chapter.

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[221] An online copy of Luke 15 is available at: https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+15&version=NRSV(accessed 14 June 2021)

[222] Barbara Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 4th ed. (Nordlingen, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, United Bible Societies, 1983). This version of the Greek NT notes two textual variants. The first variation is that some manuscripts in 15:16 have **γεμίσαι τὴν κοιλίαν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ,** translated "to fill his belly with…", while a larger number of manuscripts have **χορτασθῆναι ἐκ**, "to be filled with".
François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9: 51-19: 27*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. Donald S Deer (Augsburg, Germany: Fortress Publishers, 2013). In the case of the "filled his belly" variation, Bovon argues that this was original, but was modified by scribes since it was seen as too vulgar. However due to the age and diversity of the ancient manuscript with the shorter reading, the UBS committee considered it to be earlier. Either way, it makes no difference to the sense of the story.
The second variation is in 15:21 where some manuscripts repeat the phrase **ποίησόν με ὡς ἕνα τῶν μισθίων σου**, "treat me like one of your hired hands" from 15:19. This seems more likely to be an addition by later copyists to maintain consistency. Neither of these major variations has significance for this analysis.

## 4.2 Literary and Social Context of Luke 15:11-32

The parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15: 11-32, appears as part of Jesus' teaching as he travels from Galilee (He "sets his face to Jerusalem" in Luke 9:51) through Samaria and Judea to Jerusalem (his triumphal entry starts at Luke 19:28). Luke uses this journey to weave together Jesus' teachings (including many parables) with narrative elements such as sending out the 70 disciples before him to prepare the way.

The whole chapter of Luke 15 consists of a cohesive set of parables of Jesus. The start of the chapter provides the historical and narrative setting for the rest of the chapter:

> Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable. (Luke 15:1-3)

Historically, as strict adherents of the Jewish law, the Pharisees and scribes rejected those they saw as sinful. They associated only with those they saw as being in good standing, and so they rejected Jesus since he associated with those who were outside their definitions of the righteous. Luke often uses the narrative device of question and response between Jesus and the Pharisees to highlight the differences between the religious approaches of Jesus (and his later Christian followers) and the Pharisees.

The historical context needs not only to consider the time of Jesus but also the historical context of the early Christian era in which Luke was writing (most likely around 90 CE). The Pharisees in Luke's time, after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, were the dominant form of Judaism and were mostly unsympathetic to Christianity. Some commentators believe that the frequent condemnations of the Pharisees in the gospels are partly driven by this Christian era dispute with the Pharisees.[223] Others see the rabbis and the messianic followers of Jesus as rival siblings.[224] However, as will be seen, there is not a strong condemnation of the Pharisees and teachers of the law in this passage. After the introductory setting in Luke

[223] John A Darr, "Murmuring Sophists: Extratextual Elements in Luke's Portrayal of Pharisees," in *Anatomies of the Gospels and Beyond*, ed. Mikael C Parsons, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, and Paul N. Anderson (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2018). In this paper, Darr explores the literary function of the Pharisee character in Luke.
[224] Hayim G Perelmuter, *Siblings: Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity at Their Beginnings* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1989).

15:1-3, there are three parables, each addressing the issue of why Jesus associates with sinners.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4-7) is explicitly explained as signaling the joy in heaven over one repentant sinner. The Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15: 8-10) similarly explicitly likens the joy in heaven at a repentant sinner to the woman's joy at finding the lost coin.

The third parable is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It follows on directly from the earlier parables, and it is also a response to the opening comments by the Pharisees and scribes. However, it has a different form to the earlier parables since it has two parts. The first half, the story of the lost son, follows a similar theme of loss, recovery, and rejoicing. However, the second half of the story addresses the unforgiving response by the older son to his brother's repentance and reinstatement. In the first two parables, Jesus explains explicitly that the joy in heaven at a repentant sinner who was lost is like the joy of a recovered sheep or coin. However, in this third parable, the lost item is indeed a repentant sinner and following on from the earlier explanations, the joy of the father in the parable echoes the joy in heaven at a repentant sinner. Together the first two parables and the first half of the prodigal son are all direct answers to the Pharisees' question, explaining that Jesus is welcoming those who have first been welcomed back into fellowship with God. The second half of the parable regarding the grumbling older son then mirrors the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes who, like the older son, are reluctant to accept the repentant sinners. Luke 15:2 introduces this collection of parables by referring to the Pharisees and scribes 'grumbling' and repudiating Jesus' practice of table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. This introduction establishes the context in which the interpretation of the three parables proceeds.

So, the literary context here is that all three parables are in direct response to the Pharisees' comments and their rejection of Jesus' table fellowship with sinners, with the answer directed both to the Pharisees and also to the wider crowd that were the targets of Jesus' preaching.

## 4.3 History of Interpretation

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the longest in the Gospels, and it has an extensive history of interpretation. In this section, a brief outline of this history is given.[225]

### 4.3.1 Patristic Interpretations

In keeping with the hermeneutical practices of the early Church through to medieval times, many interpretations of the parables in general, and the Prodigal Son in particular, were allegorical. In such interpretations, each of the elements of the story is a symbol or allegory of a more general truth. The stories are typically taken out of their historical context and used as doctrinal and theological statements hidden behind the everyday characters and setting of the narrative. One example will suffice to illustrate the allegorical style. The following are the allegorical symbols explained by Ambrose (writing in 388 CE).[226]

The younger son represents those who depart from the church and from Christ. The far country represents separation from Christ. The citizen of the far country is the devil, the pigs are those of whom the devil has control, living in filth and foulness. The pods fed to the pigs are the lack of virtue and boastful words of worthless people expounded as empty secular philosophy and eloquence. The son's confession represents the confession that all believers must make to receive forgiveness. The father running to the son represents the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who rush to offer forgiveness and acceptance. The kiss of the father is the removal of the yoke of sinful slavery. The cloak represents wisdom, the ring is a sign of sincere faith, and the sandals are provided to go out and preach the gospel. The fatted calf represents Christ crucified, and the banquet represents the Eucharist. The elder brother represents arrogant Christians who resent the forgiveness granted to sinners.[227]

Not all interpreters at this time agreed with such allegorical interpretations. For example, Cyril of Alexandria (376-444 CE) could not accept an association of Israel with the older

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[225]Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9: 51-19: 27*. 430-438 For more details on the history of interpretation, see Bovon's commentary. Alles also gives an extended history of interpretation in his PhD thesis: Tyrell J Alles, "The Narrative Meaning and Function of the Parable of the Prodigal Son: Luke 15: 11-32" (Doctor of Sacred Theology Catholic University of America, 2008).

[226] St Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke with Fragments on the Prophecy of Isaias*, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1998). As quoted in: Arthur A. Just, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III, Luke* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 246-252.

[227] Other early commentators, such as Augustine, associate the elder son with the people of Israel who are unwilling to acknowledge Christ as messiah and so unable to join in the banquet of salvation.

virtuous brother since Israel was often rebellious and disobedient, but he could accept that the fatted calf represented Christ since he died for all, not just for the Gentiles but also for Israel.[228]

Sitting alongside the allegorical interpretations of the parable were so-called moral or penitential interpretations, which examine the meaning of the parable for the life of the Christian. Here, the parable represents the eagerness of God to forgive the repentant sinner. Only when the magnitude of one's sinfulness is revealed does one flee to the father's forgiveness, which is always available and freely given. In such interpretations, the older brother often symbolizes those arrogant and self-righteous Christians who are reluctant to accept God's forgiveness for those who have left the Church and returned.

These two interpretations – allegorical and penitential – often stood beside each other. [229] Many of the early written materials on the Prodigal Son are model sermons and are intended for pastoral use, with the emphasis changed to meet the pastoral needs of the time. Delcorno recently undertook a detailed investigation of the pastoral uses of the Prodigal Son in the Middle Ages.[230] He found a broad range of pastoral interpretations, which use lessons from the parable applied to specific pastoral issues of the times. The Parable of the Prodigal Son was also an excellent fit to medieval morality plays which emphasised the human condition as divine, then fallen, then redeemed beings.

### 4.3.2 Reformation Interpretations

The Reformers were keen to recover the original meaning of scripture, and so took a new look at the scriptural context of the parable. They rejected the traditional allegorical interpretations of the parable, returning to its historical context. John Calvin, in his

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[228] Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary of the Gospel of St. Luke*, trans. R. Payne Smith (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1853), Sermon 107 https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyril_on_luke_10_sermons_99_109.htm#SERMON%20CVII.(accessed 27 August 2021)

[229] Peter Chrysologus and Valerian, *Chrysologus Selected Sermons and Valerian Selected Homilies*, trans. George E Ganss (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 25-51. Chrysologus (c. 380-450 CE) presented a cycle of five sermons on the prodigal son. The first four sermons present a moral interpretation – the first sermon discusses the son's departure, the second is about his time in the far country, the third is about the father's forgiveness, the fourth is about the elder son. The fifth sermon then discusses an allegorical meaning of the parable, with the two sons representing the Gentiles and the Jews.

[230] Pietro Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son: The Pastoral Uses of a Biblical Narrative (C. 1200–1550)* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2017).

commentary on Luke, says of the allegory that the son represents all those who seek worldly benefit outside the Church:

> But as I am afraid that this allusion may be thought overstrained, I shall satisfy myself with the literal meaning; not that I disapprove of the opinion, that under this figure is reproved the madness of those who imagine that it will be advantageous for them to have something of their own, and to be rich apart from the heavenly Father; but that I now confine myself within the limits of a commentator.[231]

Calvin's interpretation prioritises the historical interpretation of the parable, i.e., what it meant to those hearing it at its original telling. In this case, the parable is an open-ended response to the Pharisee's criticism of Jesus' consorting with sinners. Calvin also stresses that the meaning of the parable is about the love of God the father for repentant sinners, and the willingness of some to accept this: "In the first part is shown how readily God is disposed to pardon our sins, and in the second part … is shown the great malignity and obstinacy of those who murmur at his compassion."[232]

Delcorno outlines a heated debate during the Reformation between Martin Luther and the Catholic theologian Johannes Eck, regarding the nature of the penitent as symbolized by the prodigal son.[233] Luther believed that the penitent is shaped only by the love of God, while Eck insisted that the fear of damnation played an equal role. This is an example of how the Prodigal Son has been used to reflect upon contemporary theological issues, which for Reformation theologians included the nature of forgiveness and salvation. In this thesis, the same parable will be used to reflect on a social and theological issue of our time – creation care.

### 4.3.3 The Rise of Academic Interpretations

Although commentaries continued to be published through the following centuries, their purpose remained largely pastoral. In the mid-nineteenth century, European scholars turned their attention to more detailed analyses of the parables, looking at questions of literary genre as well as interpretation.[234] As the rise of historical-critical approaches took place, there was

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[231] Jean Calvin, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2013). Paragraph 528
[232] Jean Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, UK: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 343.
[233] Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son: The Pastoral Uses of a Biblical Narrative (C. 1200–1550)*, 377.
[234] Some examples include:

also a divide between the more radical approaches in European interpretation, and an ongoing emphasis on pastoral interpretations in Britain, which saw the continued use of allegorical categories. There was a need to clarify the question of the genre of parables. Cornelius Elisa van Koetsveld, writing in Dutch, strongly rejected the extravagant and allegorical interpretations presented by British scholars: "Jesus did not offer his parables as things to be played about with. His intention was to teach, and to teach something definite, which excluded any other idea."[235]

The most important book in this era was *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Parables of Jesus) by Adolf Jülicher, Professor of New Testament Exegesis at Marburg University.[236] Geraint Jones refers to this work as "not only a monumental pioneering work in the study of the parables but also an important contribution to the modern method of New Testament study."[237] Indeed, Jones divides his history of interpretation of parables into before-Jülicher, Jülicher, and after-Jülicher.[238]

Jülicher's first volume deals with the nature and purpose of the parables as a genre, plus a detailed historical summary of previous interpretations highlighting the extravagant allegorical nature of many of those interpretations, while his second volume deals with interpretations of individual parables.[239] Jülicher rejected any allegorical interpretations of parables, except as a last resort. This even extended to casting doubt on the allegorical interpretation given in scripture explaining the Parable of the Sower, which he saw as an addition by the gospel writer. He believed that the meaning of the parable was tied to its historical context. He considered that the parable's meaning was the literal meaning, rather than any allegorical meaning or any hidden meaning – the parables were not riddles meant to preserve the messianic secret. He also claimed that the parable must be read as a whole and

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Edward Gresswell, *An Exposition of the Parables and Other Parts of the Gospels (6 Volumes)* ((Reprint) Miami, FL: Hardpress Publishers, 1834-1835). *This series of six volumes ran to several thousand pages in total.*
Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (London, UK: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1847). *This book was published through 14 editions from 1847-1920.*
Alexander Balmain Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ : A Systematic and Critical Study of the Parables of Our Lord*, Fourth ed. (New York, NY: Hodder & Stoughton, 1881).

[235] Cornelius Elisa van Koetsveld, *(De Gelijkenissen Van Den Zaligmaker (the Parables of the Saviour)* (Schoonhoven, Netherlands: S.E. van Nooten, 1869).
[236] Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu (2 Vols)* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr, 1888-89).
[237] Geraint Vaughan Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables* (London, UK: SPCK, 1964), 17.
[238] Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables*, 1-40.
[239] To date, there is no English translation of this important work and some of the other subsequent citations, so my analysis relies on secondary sources, particularly Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables*.

that many elements of the parable are simply background, and, importantly, that each parable focuses on one single point of reference to the real world.

In the case of the Prodigal Son, Jülicher believed that the single point of reference of the parable is God's boundless love for repentant sinners. It repeats the same point as the previous two parables of the lost sheep and lost coin. He rejects the second part of the parable as an addition by Luke because, otherwise, the parable would not match Jülicher's "single-point" thesis.

After publication, many argued about each of Jülicher's claims. Christian Bugge rejected the claim that no parables have hidden meanings, instead arguing that there are good reasons for sometimes speaking in riddles.[240] Paul Fiebig argued that there was a rabbinic tradition at the time of Jesus of speaking in allegory.[241] Nevertheless, Jülicher's work was most important in returning the interpretation of the parables to a focus on the meaning of the parable in its historical and narrative context in scripture.

### 4.3.4 Recent Analysis and Interpretation

The explosion of interest in literary and social analysis during the twentieth century led to many of these analytical approaches being applied to the New Testament parables. Rather than the nineteenth-century approach of interpreting each parable as having a single point of reference to the real world, many different approaches were explored to shed new light on the parables' meaning and significance.

Charles H. Dodd analyses the parables in the context of the eschatological "crisis" of the ministry of Jesus, arguing that the "kingdom" that was the focus of many parables was the new kingdom now present with Jesus' ministry, not some future event.[242] While agreeing with the single-point thesis of Jülicher, he replaces the single moral point with a single eschatological point. Additionally, he cites the meaning of the parables in the life and times of Jesus. Jesus is answering the Pharisees' criticism of his eating with sinners and proclaiming that he has come to find the prodigal children of Israel to join in the celebration

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[240] Christian August Bugge, *Die Haupt-Parabeln Jesu* (Giessen, Germany: Alfred Töpelmann, 1903).
[241] Paul Fiebig, *Altjüdische Gleichnisse Und Die Gleichniss Jesu* (Tübingen: Mohr 1904).
[242] Charles H Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom, Rev. Ed.*, vol. 5 (New York, NY: Scribner, 1961). *The original edition was published in 1935.*

of the kingdom of God that he has ushered in as Messiah. The Pharisees are invited to join in the celebration of this new kingdom.

Joachim Jeremias, using the principles of form-criticism, aims to trace back the development of the parables to their original form, stripping away any embellishments of the gospel writers.[243] He is also interested in the parables' immediate meanings and purposes at the time that they were delivered. He disagrees with the suggestion that the second half of the parable is an addition. He believes that this parable has a double climax. In the first half, there is one point.

> The parable describes with the most impressive simplicity what God is like—his goodness, his grace, his great mercy, his abounding love. He rejoices over the return of the lost, like the father who prepared the feast of welcome.[244]

There is another point in the second half.

> The parable was addressed to men who were like the elder brother, men who were offended at the gospel. It was meant as an appeal to their conscience; Jesus says to them: See the greatness of God's love for his lost children, and contrast it with your own joyless, loveless, unthankful, and self-righteous lives. Cease from your loveless ways and be merciful. The spiritually dead are rising to new life, the lost are returning home; rejoice with them.[245]

Geraint Jones examines the parables from two aspects – artistic and existential.[246] As art, the parables have a timeless quality that allows the original hearer or the modern reader to use the parables to reflect on their own situation. Jones explains the artistic role of parables as follows.

> The raw material, the stuff of parables, is human life – human life as worked upon and shaped by the creative imagination. For it should not be forgotten that Jesus was not only a religious teacher but a creative artist of unusual skill and penetration, the author of some of the world's classics in short stories and fables, and one whose distinction in this field was as unique as the rest of his mission. Indeed, the

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[243] Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. Samuel Henry Hooke (London, UK: SCM Press 1972). *The German version was first published in 1954.*
[244] Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, trans. Frank Clarke and Samuel Henry Hooke (New York, NY: Scribner, 1966), 101.
[245] Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 102.
[246] Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables*.

> Christological significance of this aspect of Jesus' activity as a great creative artist in his own right has not been fully explored.[247]

In terms of the existential nature of the parables, Jones builds on the works of the mid-century existential philosophers. The parables are reflections in miniature of the nature of human existence. Jones explains that the Prodigal Son explores universal human themes of freedom, estrangement, longing, return, anguish, reconciliation.[248]

Kenneth Bailey uses a literary-cultural approach to the parables.[249] Through extensive research in the Middle East among non-literate peasant communities, he attempts to recover what the parables would have meant to the original hearers of the stories. For example, he looks in detail at the act, customs and significance of the father granting the younger son's wish for his inheritance, how unthinkable this would be for earthly Middle Eastern fathers, and the consequences of the shame this would bring on the son requiring him to leave his community. For this reason, his father runs to meet his returning son at the edge of the village to guard him against the scorn of the other villagers.

Literary theorist Algirdas-Julien Griemas pioneered the use of structural analysis of literary works.[250] Claude Levi-Strauss investigated the mythical structure of fables and folk stories.[251] Daniel Patte uses these literary analysis techniques to undertake a structuralist analysis of the parables, including a detailed analysis of the structure of the parable of the Prodigal Son.[252] He looks at the narrative structure, the mythical structure, the elementary structure, and the relationships between these. In terms of narrative structure, Patte sees the parable move through a sequence of an initial situation (harmonious family), villainy (the son leaves), a situation of lack (the son is gone), the performance of the hero (the father welcomes the son back) and back to the initial situation indicated by the celebration. The same narrative sequences are repeated with the older son. The villainy is his refusal to join the celebration, and again the father is the hero who seeks to reconcile, but the ending of the

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[247] Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables*, 131.
[248] Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables*. *Chapter 7: The Parable of the Prodigal Son: an Essay in Existential Interpretation*. 167-205.
[249] K.E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and through Peasant Eyes (Combined Edition): A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1983). (Original Editions 1976, 1980)
[250] Algirdas-Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at Method*, trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).
[251] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Monique Layton ( New York, NY: Basic Books, 1963).
[252] Daniel Patte, "Structural Analysis of the Parable of the Prodigal Son: Toward a Method," in *Semiology and Parables: Exploration of the Possibilities Offered by Structuralism for Exegesis*, ed. Daniel Patte (Pittsburgh, PA: Pickwick, 1976), 71-150.

story is not detailed (whether the family is reconciled). Based on this, Patte suggests the story should be named the Loving Father since he is the hero of the narrative.

May Ann Tolbert applies techniques of psychoanalytical criticism to the parable of the Prodigal Son.[253] She shows similarities between the father, younger son and older son and Sigmund Freud's analysis of the human psyche as consisting of the ego, the id, and the super-ego respectively.[254] For Freud, the id is the unregulated, instinctual desire for pleasure, the super-ego is the moralizing and critical element of the psyche, and the ego is the realistic part of the psyche that mediates between the other two. The father seeks to reconcile the unrestrained excesses of the younger son with the moralistic pettiness of the older son. Both sons act childishly, and it is up to the father to reconcile the family, just as the ego reconciles competing interests in the psyche. Overall, the parable reflects the human reality that we possess aspects of all three characters held together in tension.

There continue to be many scholarly works and more popular texts investigating the role of parables, not just as biblical stories, but as sources of imaginative reflections on the human condition. David Gowler investigates imaginative receptions of the parables from the second century to the present.[255] Gowler's survey looks at depictions of parables that emphasise justice and compassion, and the voices of the marginalised. Gowler investigates how Jesus' parables have been used in sermons, hymns, fiction, drama, poetry, visual art, and blues lyrics. Robert Brusic reflects on more than 50 visual images interpreting the Prodigal Son.[256] Jesus' parables remain important cultural symbols.

The academic literature and popular writings on the Prodigal Son are enormous, and there are many examples of much more detailed surveys of the history of interpretation.[257] There is a long history of imaginative use of this story, to which this thesis adds another chapter. This review also shows that the influence of the parable does not need to be restricted to its

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[253] Mary Ann Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979), 93-114.
[254] Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere (London, UK: Hogarth, 1962).
[255] David B Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus: Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millenia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).
[256] Robert M Brusic, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home: The Jerry Evenrud Collection of Images of the Parable of the Prodigal Son* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2007).
[257] Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). This is one example of a text which systematically addresses the literature on the parables.

original historical context, but it can be a source of inspiration and reflection for whatever the current theological issues of the time might be.

### 4.3.5 Ecological Interpretations

In *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke* (part of the Earth Bible Commentary series) Michael Trainor presents a holistic ecological interpretation of Luke's gospel.[258] He summarises the ecological attitudes suggested in Luke by eight theses: Luke's gospel is ecologically connected; it is a story of God revealed through Jesus who acts with ecological and environmental concern; creation is perceived and treated from different perspectives; Earth acts; Earth has a voice; Jesus is revealed as Earth's child; God delights in creation; and disciples are ecologically meditative and contemplative.[259]

Trainor regards the parable of the Prodigal Son as "rich with ecological symbolism."[260] However, ecological symbols are largely in the background in Trainor's analysis. The father's gift to the son is indicative of a non-possessive nature; it is in communion with the Earth and the pigs that the son feels remorse, the welcome gifts given to the son are products of the Earth as is the celebratory calf. He sees the story as "a celebration of a lost human member completely restored to Earth-community."[261] Trainor does not present an ecological interpretation of the parable as a standalone story, rather his interpretation is considered as part of his larger project to find common ecological themes that run through the whole of Luke's gospel.

Anne Elvey has undertaken an eco-feminist reading of the Gospel of Luke.[262] She uses a gestational paradigm to reflect on the pregnancy of Mary in relationship to the nurturing and creating power of Earth. Just as mother and child are intrinsically linked and dependent, so there is an interdependence between Earth and humanity. However, Elvey does not include a detailed analysis of the Prodigal Son in her work.

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[258] Michael Trainor, *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press Limited, 2017).
[259] Trainor, *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke*, 302-304.
[260] Trainor, *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke*, 214.
[261] Trainor, *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke*, 204.
[262] Anne Frances Elvey, *An Ecological Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Luke: A Gestational Paradigm* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005).

Robert Barry Leal investigates ecological themes in scripture, and he includes a short ecological reflection on the Prodigal Son.[263] His methodology is not stated explicitly, but it generally takes the form of identifying key themes or elements and reflecting how these can be understood ecologically. He sometimes also takes very specific images (such as a pigsty) and reflects on those. Leal identifies the two central elements of the parable as human wastefulness, and a father's forgiveness and generosity. The son's wastefulness is prefaced by noting that his wealth is part of his inheritance, just as the wealth of creation can be seen as an inheritance given by God to humanity for safekeeping. The son's wastefulness is reflected in humanity's current unsustainable use of resources and failure to care faithfully for creation. He notes the fact that human sin (son's wastefulness) is juxtaposed with environmental degradation (famine in the parable). Leal claims that, based on several OT texts where sin and environmental degradation are linked, original hearers may have seen a causal link between the son's actions and the lack of agricultural productivity.[264]

Leal equates the son's position working with pigs (noting that a pigsty represents the depths of filth and degradation) as being paralleled by humanity wallowing in a degraded environment of our own creation. Finally, he reflects on the happy ending of the parable where the son is forgiven and restored to his family. Leal believes this can only happen when "we, like the prodigal son, come to our senses, respect the inheritance we have received from God, and act with justice towards our fellow creatures on earth."[265]

The main focus of Leal's reflection is on the fact that unsustainable living today is similar to the wastefulness of the prodigal son, and that like the son we need to acknowledge our sinful ways and change our attitudes. There is limited reflection on the role of the loving father, and no reflection on the older brother, and so Leal's ecological treatment is rather incomplete.

The limited analyses of the parable of the prodigal son by Trainor and Leal are the only academic eco-theological treatments of the parable that I have found. There are pastoral and devotional articles that use the image of the prodigal son as he "squandered his property in

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[263] Barry Leal, *Through Ecological Eyes: Reflections on Christianity's Environmental Credentials* (Strathfield, Australia: St Pauls Publications, 2006), 168-174.
[264] Leal uses Hosea 4:1-3 as an example. This causal link in the parable seems weak, although there are many OT examples where the link is clear. An alternative understanding of the juxtaposition the parable would be that responsible use of resources needs to plan for bad times as well as good.
[265] Leal, *Through Ecological Eyes: Reflections on Christianity's Environmental Credentials*, 170-173.

dissolute living" (Luke 15:13) as a metaphor for the unsustainable use of Earth's resources, but these are not able to sustain the metaphor to encompass the whole parable.[266]

The relative dearth of eco-theological treatments of the Prodigal Son suggests that, despite the long history of interpretation, there is still scope for more work on a detailed eco-theological interpretation.

### 4.3.6 Previous Explorations of Virtues and the Prodigal Son

Delcorno's extensive review of ancient sermons and commentaries on the Prodigal Son notes two sources in which the notion of virtues is intertwined with the parable. First, a sermon by Bede (673-735 CE), shows how Christian virtues play a role in the son's repentance and hence our repentance – faith enables us to reject the corruption of vices for fear of judgement, hope allows us to disregard present pleasures for future reward, and love empowers us through the death of Christ to focus on the fruit of virtues and to hate vices.[267]

Second, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153 CE) presented an extended version of the parable, called the Parable of the Son of the King, to Cistercian novices and monks.[268] In Bernard's version, the father (the King) sends his servants who are personifications of the virtues, to rescue the son. Fear first finds the son, but rather than rescue him it sends him further into despair. Hope speaks the words from Luke - how many hired men in your father's house have bread in abundance while you are starving. Only Hope, sent by God, can rescue the son. Hope provides a horse, Desire, to bring them home. The father sends additional helpers, Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude and Justice to aid his return to the castle of Wisdom. Bernard summarizes the escape with "In this way, along the road, Fear urges, Hope attracts, Fortitude controls and counsels, Justice leads and directs."[269] However, all are besieged in the castle by their enemies. An envoy, Prayer, is sent to heaven for help, riding the horse of Faith. From heaven, Love, the queen of heaven, is sent to help, and all are filled with joy,

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[266] Peter Sawtell, "The Prodigal Son," *Eco-Justice Notes* (2011), accessed 6 May 2021. http://www.eco-justice.org/E-110603.asp. This is one typical example of an eco-theological article using the Prodigal Son as a metaphor for unsustainable consumption.
[267] Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son: The Pastoral Uses of a Biblical Narrative (C. 1200–1550)*, 38.
[268] Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son: The Pastoral Uses of a Biblical Narrative (C. 1200–1550)*, 41-46.
[269] Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son: The Pastoral Uses of a Biblical Narrative (C. 1200–1550)*, 44. 44. Delcorno provides a translation of the original Latin from Bernard of Clairvaux, *Opera Omnia*.

renew their strength, and defeat the enemies. Love carries the son to reunite him with the King in heaven.

This extended story, based on the parable, was allegorical in the sense that the trials of the son were meant to represent the trials to be faced by the Cistercian monks and novices. In this extended allegorical reflection, virtues are seen as essential in both the repentance of the son, and the reconciliation with the father, and by implication are essential to the life of the monks and novices.

Bernard's use of the parable is a form of extended typological interpretation.[270] Using the parable of the Prodigal Son as the type, his story of the Son of the King builds on the themes of the original parable through the overt description of virtues. The final antitype is the social situation of the novices and the challenges they will face in their monastic life.

### 4.3.7 Summary of the History of Interpretation

There have been many different approaches to the interpretation of the parable of the Prodigal Son since the writing of Luke' gospel. Pastoral accounts see the parable as a metaphor for the loving forgiveness of God for repentant sinners and ask all believers to rejoice when penitents are reconciled to God. Allegorical interpretations seek to assign theological and ecclesiastical meaning to every element of the parable, often to reinforce particular theological positions or to address issues of the time (such as the relationship between Christians and Jews). Extravagant allegories are no longer seen as academically defensible.

Historical interpretations are concerned with the original meaning of the parable when it was spoken in its historical and narrative contexts. These interpretations see the parable as a metaphorical response to the question of the Pharisees and scribes about why Jesus associates with sinners. In such interpretations, the listeners are implicitly asked to decide which response to the penitent son was most appropriate – the father (representing Jesus' acceptance) or the older son (representing the 'grumbling' Pharisees). Literary-cultural studies, such as that of Bailey[271], can assist in understanding how the story relates to the social customs of its time.

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[270] As explained earlier in section 2.3, a typological interpretation commonly uses an OT story as a pre-figuring of a NT story. An extended typological interpretation uses a biblical story as a pre-figuring of a contemporary theological or sociological situation.

[271] Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and through Peasant Eyes (Combined Edition): A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*.

Structural criticism and narrative criticism look at the structure, style and narrative flow of the parable, including its place in the larger narrative of Luke's gospel. Such analysis provides a convincing argument for the integrity of the version of the parable in scripture. Existential criticism and psychoanalytical criticism provide a broader interpretation to see how the theme of the parable resonates with the human condition through themes such as rebellion, repentance, and reconciliation. In such interpretations, the parable is not a metaphor for a linear narrative, but rather represents the ongoing struggle between rebellion and reconciliation with God and the unwavering love of God through these struggles. Academic eco-theological interpretation has been limited to identifying Earth-centred elements in the parable that appear as general themes throughout Luke's gospel (Trainor) and equating the prodigal son's waste of his family inheritance with humanity's wasteful use of creation (Leal).

None of these interpretations is the one "correct" interpretation, rather all the different analytical techniques enrich and sustain the power of the parable to inspire and inform contemporary Christian thought and action.

The primary historical message of the parable (*what it meant*) deals with Jesus' mission to rescue sinners and the responses to that mission. As important parts of the gospel narratives, parables also have contemporary guidance for the Church today (*what it means*). Here the primary meaning is about the eternal and unbounded love of God for all, especially repentant sinners.

This thesis investigates a new approach to reading this parable. Rather than looking for the objective meaning of the parable, this thesis investigates a subjective response to the current ecological crisis that we find ourselves in. If virtues are general ethical guidance for right action, then using virtues to read scripture might assist in developing a meaningful Christian response to the ecological unsustainability of our western lifestyle.

## 4.4 A New Eco-virtues Reading of the Prodigal Son

### 4.4.1 Virtues and Vices in the Text

An *eco-virtues reading* starts with an analytical step of identifying the virtues and vices that are described in the text, before seeing how these are reflected in today's ecological crisis. So, in the following analysis, the text will be examined, step by step, to identify virtues and vices.

> Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. (Luke 15: 11-12)

The younger son's request for his share of the property is an example of a lack of the virtue of temperance, i.e., the vice of **greed.**[272] It also illustrates the vice of **selfishness** (a lack of justice), since he is taking a share of the property that previously was used to support the whole family.

The father shows the virtue of **love** by granting his son's wish, and also the virtue of **temperance** since he values his son's wishes above his own access to the property that provides the family with a living. He also demonstrates **justice** by dividing his property between the two sons, most likely in accordance with succession customs, even when this personally disadvantages him.

> A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. (Luke 15:13)

The son's departure for a distant land where he lives dissolutely, and subsequently ends up destitute, illustrates several vices. First is **cowardice**, or a lack of fortitude, since the son does not remain to see the effects of his actions. His departure is swift (a few days later) and he puts significant distance (a distant country) between those he has affected by his actions. The second vice is **foolishness**, or lack of prudence, since he wastes or squanders his wealth. Finally, there is the vice of **intemperance** since he spends his funds in dissolute living.

> When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. (Luke 15:14)

The decline in the son's fortunes is not solely the result of his **intemperance**, it is exacerbated by the severe famine. Perhaps the son realised his resources were dwindling and he arranged employment to keep him going, but this option disappeared with the famine. The son's lack of foresight illustrates the vice of **imprudence** by not planning for changes in circumstances.

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[272] **Virtues** and **vices** are highlighted in bold.

> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. (Luke 15:15-16)

The son's need to work in the pig fields illustrates several vices. The son is destitute and hungry, and he does whatever he can to exist. He lacks dignity and he is **hopeless** (lacks the virtue of hope). The others in the far country give him little, except the most menial of tasks. He is valued less than the pigs he feeds, and so is given less food than them. The far country people show **lovelessness** since they care very little for him, and they show **injustice** since as a foolish foreigner of little value, he is treated lower than the pigs that are seen as more valuable in a famine.

> But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. (Luke 15: 17-20a

Finally, when the son is completely destitute, perhaps literally dying of hunger, he decides to take action by returning to his father. He exhibits the virtue of **prudence** when he rationally considers his options to survive. He shows the virtue of **temperance** in the form of his **humility** in being satisfied with a menial position upon his return. He shows the virtue of **hope** in that he is reliant on the uncertain and unmerited willingness of his father to accept him back. He shows the virtues of **humility** in his ability to confess his sins, and he shows the virtue of **fortitude** since he is willing to take the chance of rejection and shame.

> But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. (Luke 15: 20b-22)

When the son returns and is greeted by the father, both display virtuous behaviour. The father here displays undeserved **love** for his son.[273] Despite his previously **greedy** and **unjust**

[273] One might question whether such undeserved love is actually prudent or just. The older son certainly questions this. One might question whether the prodigal son was truly repentant and deserved such love. This

behaviour, the son is reinstated to sonship within the family. Furthermore, this **love** and reconciliation is not contingent on the son's repentance, but rather happens before the son can even speak. The father goes to the son, he doesn't wait for the son to come to him. This climax to the first half of the parable is traditionally seen to represent God's unexpected form of **justice** to sinners – they are accepted without reservation. The son displays the virtue of **courage** by admitting his sins before his father, but his father does not display a **cold-hearted justice**, rather, in **love,** forgives the sin and is reconciled to the son. The symbols of robe, sandals and ring signify reinstatement as a son. The fatted calf represents an extravagant expression of celebratory **love**.

> Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' (Luke 15:25-32)

When the elder son returns from the fields and finds that his brother has been accepted back, he refuses to join the celebration. This illustrates stubborn **pride** and **anger** (a lack of emotional **temperance** and forgiving **love**). From his side, he sees the celebration of his brother's return as **unjust**, since it fails to acknowledge his loyalty. He feels **unjustly** treated that his loyalty has not been rewarded over many years. His complaints exhibit a sense of entitlement – a form of **pride**. The father replies in **love** to the older son, assuring him of his worth. He reminds the older son that in terms of property, the older son can have **faith** that he will **justly** receive his earthly inheritance. But he also explains that acting with **love** means the lost will always be accepted back.

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situation indicates that virtues and vices may sometimes be in conflict. The Pharisees seemed to question whether Jesus' acceptance of sinners was ethically correct, and Jesus' response, through this parable, suggests that God's love sometimes overrules what might seem prudent, temperate, or just.

### 4.4.2 Reflections of Virtues and Vices in the Ecological Crisis

The next application step looks at how the virtuous and vicious behaviours in the parable are reflected in the modern ecological crisis. These may be virtues and vices of individuals, or they may be societal virtues and vices. Often virtues and vices are evident in actions that happen within relationships, whether these be between God and humans, between different humans, and between humans and the environment. In this application step, the virtues and vices in the parable will be used to enrich our understanding of the same virtues and vices as drivers of behaviour in the ecological crisis.[274]

The son's **greed** and **selfishness** in asking for his inheritance are reflected in today's ecological crisis by the unequal access to the Earth's resources by those in developed and less developed countries, and even between rich and poor in the same country. Rather than see the Earth's finite resources as a common good that should be equitably shared between all humanity, the current globalised economy seeks to preserve the wealth of the wealthy nations. Few would actively and explicitly promote keeping the world's poor without adequate resources, and most would applaud the work of institutions like the UN who work to implement universal development goals. However, even the most cursory of economic analyses show that the current lifestyles of the globally wealthy could never be replicated universally. Sustainable living requires a significant reduction in consumption by the wealthy, but the current viewpoint in developed countries seems to be that we need to tightly hold our own share of the Earth's resources and we are unwilling to share. The son's greed also reflects that over-consumption of resources now denies the use of those resources to future generations.

By contrast, the Father's **love**, **temperance** and **justice** in granting the inheritance mirror a just global society where the wealthy give up a significant proportion of their wealth so that

[274] Some care is needed to maintain the contextual links to the parable in the exploration of the ecological crisis. It can be tempting to go straight to an analysis of how the four cardinal and three theological virtues and their corresponding vices are evident in the behavior of individuals and society within the ecological crisis. However, it is not enough to say that there are virtues and vices in both the parable and the ecological crisis. Otherwise, the details of the parable have no direct effect on the subsequent moral analysis of the ecological crisis. Any passage with virtues and vices would lead to the same conclusions. Instead, it is essential that the way that the virtues and vices operate in the parable are reflected in the way they are considered in the ecological crisis.

the poorest can live more dignified and productive lives.[275] So, in the initial verses, there are two contrasting models of virtuous and vicious behaviour towards the family property, which can be extrapolated to two modern views about the Earth's natural resources that should be a common good shared equitably among all Earth's inhabitants. The younger son exemplifies a **selfish** and **greedy** attitude, which sees the primary motivation to support our own way of life (either personally or as a wealthy nation), even where this takes an unfair share of the Earth's resources. The father exemplifies a virtuous mindset where common wealth is shared **generously**, **justly** and **lovingly**. In the parable, the father may well have had misgivings about the younger son's demand, just as wealthy nations often have misgivings about sharing wealth if it comes at the expense of their own way of life.[276] According to some historical researchers, the younger son may have been entitled to one-third of the Father's property as his inheritance. As a nation, Australia is far less generous in its assistance to the world's poor. Australia's foreign aid has been reducing over the past decade and is now just 0.21% of Gross National Income (GNI).[277]

The son's vices in his departure and dissolute living are reflected from an ecological perspective in society's current behaviour. The first is **cowardice** in seriously addressing the effects of the ecological crisis by "running away" from consideration of our role in this crisis. Those most responsible for many of the problems, those in wealthy countries, are often far from the immediate effects. Troublesome waste is shipped to third world countries, the resources are stripped from the same countries and shipped to the wealthy, and climate refugees barely make the news. Failing to act to address unsustainable living effectively is easier when the results of that action are out of sight, and hence out of mind.

Economic **foolishness** is one cause of the current crisis. The current global economic system depends on increasing production and consumption, and if these are reduced then this

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[275] It is not immediately clear how such redistribution of wealth could be implemented on a broad societal level. As a first step, if individuals used fewer resources, then those resources would be available for others now, or in the future.

[276] One might even suggest that the father's granting of the inheritance was **imprudent**, and this could be reflected in today's crisis as God being **imprudent** in giving humanity stewardship of creation. This can be used in discussions about how this stewardship role should be exercised.

[277] https://www.worldvision.com.au/get-involved/advocacy/australian-aid
A survey by World Vision shows that Australians think 16% of the Federal Budget is spent on foreign aid, and that this should be reduced to 12%, whereas in reality the Australian Government spends $4 billion on foreign aid in 2019/20, which is 0.21% of Australia's Gross National Income (GNI) This amount has been reducing since its peak of 0.34% of GNI in 2012-2013 and has never been close to the 0.5% bipartisan agreement made as part of the Millennium Development goals in 2000, or the 0.7% target set by the UN for developed countries.

constitutes a recession, and this is seen as poor government. Just as the younger son may have thought that he had so much wealth that he could afford to waste it, our current unsustainable use of resources on a global scale seems equally short-sighted and foolish. One imagines that the son's far-country friends saw no reason to discourage his spending since they benefitted. The prevailing production/consumption economic model also has no incentive to preference sustainable living.

The same economic system does not encourage **temperance**, but rather encourages ever-increasing consumption. The increasing efficiency of both agricultural and industrial production means that less wealth is needed to provide basic necessities, and there is more wealth for discretionary consumption, even if this is mostly wasted on trivialities. A padded, heated soft-closing toilet seat seems an **intemperate** luxury when a significant proportion of the world's population has no access to adequate sanitation. This highlights the difference between personal ownership of wealth and concern for the common good. Current social and economic models lead to a sense of entitlement for the privileged and wealthy.

We see the same vices of the son's dissolute lifestyle at work in our modern ecological crisis. The Earth's resources are dwindling in areas such as fossil fuels, clean air, clean water, natural habitats and biodiversity. While there is strong scientific evidence of this degradation and even a widespread awareness of these problems within society, there seems to be limited societal will to reduce our level of consumption. There is a danger that, like the son, our **intemperate** consumption of resources will continue until resources are exhausted. Like the **imprudent** son, we are not adequately planning for a sustainable future. Certainly, there are many ecological programs and initiatives that are making some difference, but overall, we are still heading in the wrong direction. Just as the **imprudent** son seemed to have no plan to ride out the famine, society has no firm plan for what a sustainable developed economy would even look like, and certainly not how to transition to such a lifestyle in a way that is consistent with the political will of current developed societies.

We can see the vices of **injustice**, **hopelessness** and **lovelessness** that were identified with the son's job feeding the pigs reflected in the current ecological crisis. As well as a purely environmental issue, the ecological crisis is also a social justice issue. The poor, especially those in less developed countries, will be inequitably and **unjustly** affected by climate change. In a globalised economy, rainforests are cleared for cash crops or for mines that can feed our insatiable appetite to consume. The health and well-being of both the local people

and the animals and plants of the forest are ignored, just as the needs of the destitute **foolish** son were ignored. Given this situation now, one can only imagine the consequences for such people when climate change more significantly impacts the Earth over the next century. We are not prepared for a "great famine."

In desperation, the son finally realises the depths of his problem and the need to take action. In terms of the modern ecological crisis, there are parallels in the scientific certainty of problems like climate change, deforestation and reduced biodiversity. There is an increasing proportion of humanity who **prudently** accept that we have indeed reached an ecological emergency equivalent to the son's starving to death, and we need to take desperate action. However, many still seem content to continue as if there is no crisis at all or at least no crisis that can't be fixed with smart technology. Unfortunately, the parable contains a warning that the societal will to change to a sustainable lifestyle may not come until the global situation affects them personally and drastically. Unlike the **foolish** son, we should **prudently** choose to take action before the situation is desperate.

The **humble** acceptance by the son of his guilt, his **hopeful** plans for repentance and some sort of restoration and the **courageous** decision to follow through with a shameful course of action have parallels today. I believe that there are two significant societal obstacles to a meaningful response to the ecological crisis. The first is the **intemperate** unwillingness to forgo the comfortable but unsustainable lifestyle of developed nations, and this has been discussed earlier. The second reason is the **lack of courage** to admit that we all are part of the problem. Unsustainable living is a societal sin (or a structural evil, as Cynthia Moe-Lobeda calls it), similar to the uneven distribution of global wealth.[278] However, none of us likes to admit that our basic economic and social structures are unsustainable, **unjust**, **imprudent** and sinful, especially when there seems no obvious alternative way of life.

It is here that a uniquely Christian response to the environmental crisis can be identified. St Paul neatly summarises the Christian paradox of simultaneously being saints and sinners, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not

[278] Cynthia D Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013).

want is what I do."(Rom 7:18b-19) Ecologically, this corresponds to acknowledging being part of the problem, while simultaneously working to seek a solution to the problem.[279]

Secular society has much more difficulty with such a seemingly hypocritical position. To live guilt-free, it is necessary to deny that issues like climate change require urgent action by everybody. It is not that all those choosing to continue an unsustainable lifestyle do so because they are recklessly **greedy** or **unjust**. I believe it is because many cannot manage the cognitive dissonance of living a consumerist lifestyle once they admit that it is unsustainable and sinful. Ecologically aware Christians should be able to make the **courageous** and **humbling** decision to admit their continuing part in the societal sin of unsustainability while working towards the restoration of a sustainable Earth. A key issue is how to spread this message firstly more widely in the Church and then to secular society.

The son's **humbling** decision to return presents another parallel in the son's decision to return home as a hired servant. The son realises that his previous position as part of the ruling family is unlikely, but instead, he imagines a more modest position as a hired worker and sets his goals on how to achieve that through repentance in front of his Father. Here is another missing piece in the current plans to reverse our unsustainable lifestyle – a clear vision of what the alternative could be. Like the son who **prudently** knows he cannot survive feeding the pigs, we know that we cannot survive as a global society at our current levels of consumption and pollution. The prodigal knew he couldn't return to his dissolute lifestyle, but instead, he developed a plan for a new, more **humble** but sustainable lifestyle. A major challenge today is to identify and explain what our sustainable future will look like so that people can be convinced to work towards that future.

In terms of the modern ecological crisis, the younger son's return reflects a time when society has acknowledged the sinful nature of an unsustainable lifestyle, has fully recognized the effects of the ecological crisis and has decided as a community to aim for a more sustainable way of life. The passage confirms that we can trust that God will always be accepting of us, even in our sinful state. Furthermore, having accepted that sustainable living will require a reduction in our consumption, and being reconciled to a less consumerist life, this parable gives **hope** that our lives will actually be more blessed when we are reconciled to the world

[279] This Pauline paradox can be thought of as representing a type of hermeneutical key in understanding current societal values and problems. Explicit acknowledgement of the paradox can be an important step towards addressing problems such as climate change.

around us. We can enjoy creation's intrinsic worth, rather than treating it as being primarily of instrumental value to us. We can be reconciled back into the biotic community of all creation. We will still depend on plants and animals for clothing (robe and sandals, fatted calf), but we will do this sustainably. Rather than eating as if every day is a feast, our feasts can be reserved for celebrations, and sustainable living will include new approaches to how our food is grown, transported, and sold.

The second half of the parable deals with the elder son's response to his brother's return and his father's forgiveness. The elder son responds to the celebration of his brother's return with **pride** and **anger**, vices of **intemperance** and **lack of love**, and he refuses to join the celebration. His sense of entitlement rejects a generous response to his repentant brother. The broken relationships in the parable's family are reflected in the tensions and breakdowns in community relationships caused by differing responses to the environmental crisis.

Hard-line activists resort to civil disobedience and obstruction of businesses they see as ecologically harmful. Coal miners and their communities are worried about their economic future, and they may see protesters as rabble-rousers and hypocrites. Farmers whose livelihood depends on **wise** management of their land see themselves as being **unjustly** blamed for poor care of creation. Political parties **imprudently** try to adopt a compromise position that seeks to address climate change while still supporting the underlying growth-driven economy that is a major cause of the ecological crisis. School children go on a climate strike, afraid that they will not be left with a habitable planet during their lifetime. The second half of the parable reflects the societal divisions caused by different approaches to the ecological crisis, and each of these different groups can be seen as being reflected in the angry elder brother when they decry their opponents.[280]

In contrast to the **proud**, **angry**, **unforgiving** elder son who sees himself as being treated **unjustly**, the father models a different behaviour. Above all, he models **love** and the restoration of relationships. He goes to both the sons and invites them into a celebration of restored family and community. A challenge for the church today is to model our behaviour on the father who loves both sons. Rather than treat them based on their loyalty or their correct actions, both are accepted unreservedly. The father assures the elder son that he can

[280] One might associate the older brother only with those who do not wish to share power and resources, however this divides people into "right" (like me) and "wrong" (not like me). The contrast I have drawn is between conflict and reconciliation, which can apply to those on either side of a debate.

have **faith** that he will still inherit, just as we should have **faith** in God's promise to care for our needs, even if we give up our unsustainable lifestyles.

We are called to treat all people with respect and to acknowledge that the ecological crisis is a cause of stress and concern for many who are desperate for **hope**. For some, it is because their livelihoods in industries such as mining are in danger, for others such as Pacific islanders who are amongst the first climate refugees it is fear of losing their homes, for others, it is anger at what they see as irresponsible management of the Earth's resources, for still others it is the cognitive dissonance of wanting to live more sustainably but finding themselves locked into an economic system that contradicts good care of creation.

Modelled on the **loving** father, the church is called to be a beacon of ecological reconciliation amongst all these differing viewpoints and to respect the many different concerns and viewpoints across society.[281] Having declared their position in favour of creation care over consumerism, the church is called to **love** all, both those who agree and those who disagree with its position, and to work towards reconciling and understanding their different positions.

### 4.4.3 Implications for Christian Discipleship

A key advantage of Virtue Ethics as an ethical framework is that it not only identifies ethically good behaviours but also acknowledges that humans are not purely rational creatures. This is evident in the ecological crisis where the clear scientific consensus on the need to urgently act to restore the environment has not led to equally urgent action by individuals and governments.

Virtue Ethics suggests that becoming a virtuous person is not simply a rational decision, it is a matter of consciously practising virtuous behaviour until this becomes a natural way of life. Aristotle notes that "the moral virtues, then, are produced in us neither by nature nor against nature. Nature, indeed, prepares in us the ground for their reception, but their complete formation is the product of habit."[282]

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[281]George Handley, "Environmentalism as a Religious Idea," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2015), accessed 29 July 2021. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/environmentalism-as-a-religious-idea/.
"Too little has been accomplished for the environment, and I suspect it is because too many have preferred to debate who is right rather than find a way to do what is good. We simply have not worked hard enough to identify common values. This is why we end up with debates where opposing sides deserve, or almost seem to depend on, each other. The rhetoric in such fights might look like courage, but it is really disguised cowardice: it speaks forcefully but without the slightest interest in genuine dialogue."
[282] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1103a3

Pope Francis also notes the importance of even small actions in changing our ecological mindset.

> Saint Therese of Lisieux invites us to practise the little way of love, not to miss out on a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship. An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness…. Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. [283]

If the goal of ecological discipleship is a more sustainable lifestyle, then it must encompass more than an ecologically focussed theology and it must encourage lifestyle changes, i.e., changes in actions as well as beliefs. As argued earlier, philosophies based on teleological and deontological frameworks may be fine for determining what the correct ethical actions are, but they do little to encourage irrational, emotional humans to execute those correct actions.

Virtue Ethics instead concentrates on the nature of the actor. One insight of Virtue Ethics is that one becomes more likely to act virtuously if one consciously and continually practices these virtues. This gives some understanding of why the strategies suggested by watershed discipleship practitioners are useful in encouraging ecological discipleship. By actively encouraging even minor ecologically aware congregational actions, individuals and communities are reinforced in their adoption of more ecologically sustainable lifestyles.

Learning ecological virtues is not a linear process of head-to-heart-to-hand, i.e., it is not a straightforward sequence of first intellectually accepting that the ecological crisis is real, then building the emotional and spiritual desire for change, and then actually implementing meaningful lifestyle choices. Rather the process is much more circular – it is by undertaking even small actions such as emphasising creation in worship or participating in environmental clean-ups that reinforce both the intellectual and spiritual changes which in turn encourage more substantial action.

As an example of how these new insights from the Prodigal Son can extend to more than just an academic treatise, a set of small group Bible studies has been developed, based on an ecological reading of the parable. This is presented as one example of how these new

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[283] Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter, Laudato Si*. para 230

insights might be applied in congregational life. The text of this study is presented in Appendix A. The design of these studies is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

## 4.5 Critical Analysis of the New Insights for this Parable

The primary function of this parable to its original audience was as a response to the Pharisees' opinions about Jesus' fellowship with sinners. The Pharisees and scribes objected to the priority which Jesus gave to acts of mercy and solidarity over and above his observance of holiness and purity. The first half of the story about the younger son's sins and subsequent repentance and forgiveness assured Jesus' followers that they had a rightful place in God's kingdom. Their return to God's Kingdom is celebrated in heaven. This repeats the theme from the first two parables in Luke 15. The second half of the story uses the older son's anger and complaints as a mirror for the Pharisees' grumbling. Through the words of the father in the parable, Jesus explains that he understands the reasons for the Pharisees' grumbling, but also encourages them to see that they are duty-bound not just to accept repentant sinners back, but to celebrate with them, as he does.

In addition to this primary meaning, the eco-virtues approach provides a method for bringing a particular problem to the text, in this case, the current ecological crisis, and then using the text to reflect on the causes and solutions for that problem in terms of the virtues and vices discussed in the text. Parables are usually a call to action, or as Snodgrass calls them, stories with intent, and just as their primary meaning is typically a call to action, an eco-virtues reflection on a parable can likewise help encourage us to act in response to the ecological crisis.[284]

As described in the above analysis, this hermeneutical approach assumes that we already know what the scientific facts are about the ecological crisis, and it also assumes that humanity needs to change its relationship with creation to avoid further ecological damage. The new insights will be about the reasons why such restoration of creation relationship is not happening and how it might be encouraged and enabled.

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[284] Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 9.
Snodgrass writes: "A parable's ultimate aim is to awaken insight, stimulate the conscience, and move to action. …One of the major problems of Christian churches, of Western Christianity in particular, is our stultifying passivity. The parables compel us — for Christ's sake literally — to do something!"
This could be rephrased as follows. Rather than asking what a parable means, ask what a parable encourages us to do.

The younger son displays greed, injustice, shame, intemperance, and imprudence when he asks for his inheritance, cashes it in, and leaves for a dissolute life in a distant country. These same vices are evident in the causes and responses to the ecological crisis. Our current lifestyle is enabled by an unjust distribution of resources to enable an intemperate western lifestyle, which is unwisely degrading our environment. Even if we are rationally aware of the problem, shame prevents us from openly admitting and acting on it, instead we ignore the problem.

The son's destitute condition as a result of his foolishness, the lack of love by others and the final admission of guilt provides a warning that widespread action against environmental action may not occur until conditions are dire. By contrast, the son's prudence in deciding to return to his father, his humility in being willing to accept a simpler life, and his faith, hope and courage in returning home gives us today hope that a better relationship with creation achieved by sustainable use of resource might be achieved if we have faith and hope that God wishes this simpler lifestyle and we have the courage to act. This is reinforced by the love lavished by the father on the prodigal son, and his restoration to a right relationship with his father, which reflects the joy involved in better relationships with creation.

The anger and perceived injustice of the elder son are a reflection of his sense of hurt entitlement, where his hard work and sacrifice have not been recognized. Many of us believe a consumerist lifestyle is an entitlement for our hard work. The older son's rejection of reconciliation is in contrast to the father. The father's loving assurances and gentle explanations reflect a key role for the Church in modelling respect, love and conciliation in action related to the ecological crisis, with the objective of restoring right relationships between each other, between humanity and creation, and always guided by a loving creator.

At least for this text, this new interpretive technique provides valuable points of connection between an ancient parable and a modern crisis. In both its original context, and in this new reflection, the parable is a strong call to careful self-examination and to loving action.

# Chapter 5 An Eco-Virtues Reading of Obadiah

## 5.1 The Text for Interpretation

The OT text that has been chosen for examination is the book of Obadiah. The prophetic books of the OT are powerful and often uncompromising oracles about how God's people have neglected their covenant responsibilities and the consequences of those actions.

The Book of the Twelve, or the minor prophets, are shorter books with a more concentrated focus than the larger books of Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah, and they often concentrate on a single issue. Obadiah is the shortest book of the OT consisting of a single prophetic oracle, and this allows an ecological interpretation of the whole book as a single pericope.

Other authors have done ecological interpretations of OT prophetic books and passages, and many of these are rich with overt environmental symbolism. These include my own look at Joel[285], and other researchers' investigations of Jeremiah,[286] Ezekiel,[287] Isaiah,[288] Hosea,[289] Amos,[290] Micah,[291] Jonah,[292] and Zephaniah.[293] However, I am not aware of any ecological investigation of Obadiah. Because of the lack of previous ecological interpretations, and also

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[285] Neil W Bergmann, "Ecological Appropriation of Joel," *Australian e-Journal of Theology* 20, no. 1 (2013).
[286] Shirley Wurst, "Retrieving Earth's Voice in Jeremiah: An Annotated Voicing of Jeremiah 4," in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, ed. Norman C Habel (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
Gunther H Wittenberg, "The Vision of Land in Jeremiah 32," in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
[287] Keith Carley, "Ezekiel's Formula of Desolation: Harsh Justice for the Land/Earth," in *The Earth Story in Psalms and Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
Kalinda Rose Stevenson, "If Earth Could Speak. The Case of the Mountains against Yhwh in Ezekiel 6; 35–36," in *The Earth Story in Psalms and Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
[288] John Olley, "'The Wolf, the Lamb, and a Little Child': Transforming the Earth Community in Isaiah," in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
Anne Gardner, "Ecojustice or Anthropological Justice?: A Study of the New Heavens and the New Earth in Isaiah 65.17," in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
[289] Laurie J Braaten, "Earth Community in Hosea 2," in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
[290] Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*. (Marlow also investigates Hosea and first Isaiah in this book)
[291] Keith Innes, "God, the Earth and Humanity in the Book of Micah," *JRI Briefing Papers* 28 (2014), accessed 29 July 2021. https://jri.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Innes-JRI-Briefing-28.pdf.
[292] Willie Van Heerden, "Ecological Interpretations of the Jonah Narrative-Have They Succeeded in Overcoming Anthropocentrism?," *Journal for Semitics* 23, no. 1 (2014).
[293] Cornelis Johannes Redelinghuys, "Creation Utterly Consumed? Towards an Eco-Critical Rereading of Zephaniah 1: 2-6," *Old Testament Essays* 30, no. 3 (2017).

because of its manageable size, the book of Obadiah has been chosen for interpretation using the eco-virtues interpretive method.

Following the methodology used in the previous chapter, the analysis will begin with an examination of the literary and historical context, followed by a history of interpretation, the new interpretation using the eco-virtues approach, and finally a critical analysis of any new insights.

There are not any significant textual variants in the Hebrew text. The poetic nature of the text presents some minor challenges for translation, and these will be dealt with later. The New Revised Standard Version translation is used.[294] For those unfamiliar with the text, reading the book before proceeding may be helpful.

## 5.2 Literary Context of Obadiah

The primary meaning of Obadiah is as a prophetic oracle against the Edomites, in particular for their part in the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Obadiah prophesies that the Edomites will be punished for their misdeeds and that Israel will be restored under God's rule.

Neither a clear identification of the author nor a clear date for the prophecy is provided in the book. The author is only identified as Obadiah (servant of the Lord). This was a common Israelite name, and there were about a dozen people called Obadiah in the OT.[295]The one who has a more extended narrative role is the Obadiah who was in charge of the palace in the time of King Ahab, and who convinced Elijah to meet with Ahab and subsequently triumph over the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). Traditionally, this official was believed to be the author of the book of Obadiah, but recent scholarship has largely dismissed this view since this would give a 9th century BCE date which doesn't match the content of the prophecy.[296] Its canonical placement in the Book of the Twelve between Amos and Jonah, both 8th century

[294] An online version of the NRSV translation is available at: https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Obadiah+1&version=NRSV

[295] Some are simply mentioned in the genealogies in Chronicles (1 Chr 3:21, 1 Chr 7:3, 1 Chr 8:38, 1 Chr 9:16, 1 Chr 9:44, 1 Chr 12:9, 1 Chr 27:19). Others are mentioned as officials and Levites (2 Chr 17:7, 2 Chr 34:12, Ezra 8:9, Neh 10:5, Neh 12:25).

[296] Dennis R. Magary, "Obadiah, Theology Of," in *New International Dictionary of Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997).

BCE prophets is perhaps an artefact of this traditional view of authorship. The current consensus view is that the author is an otherwise unknown prophet, Obadiah.

In terms of possible dates, the content of Obadiah suggests it was written soon after Jerusalem was attacked by outsiders. The first suggested date is during the reign of Jehoram (848-821 BCE) as described in 2 Chr 21:8-20. Edom revolted against rule by Judah and set up their own king, and Jerusalem was attacked. However, given that the 2 Chronicles text goes on to say that Jehoram was unloved by his subjects, and also that only the King's house was plundered, the only real strength of this proposed date is that it potentially fits with the identification of Obadiah of Ahab's court as the author.

A later date, which is preferred by modern scholars, is that the prophecy was written soon after the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 BCE. The scale of this defeat and the subsequent Babylonian exile corresponds well to the scale of the trauma and anguish in the book of Obadiah. So, this analysis will assume this later date.

The context of the book depends on the long and complicated history between Judah and Edom.[297] Edom was the land directly south-east of Judah, and trade routes between Judah and Egypt passed through Edom. Traditionally, the Edomites were the descendants of Esau, the disenfranchised brother of Jacob (also known as Israel). Edom also refers to the nation of people who live in that country, and the name "Esau" is also used to refer to the people of Edom.

The region of Edom was mountainous, and its capital was the modern tourist destination of Petra – a city protected with its entrance via a narrow chasm. Initially, the relationship between Edom/Esau and Israel/Jacob was friendly. After Esau lost his birthright to Jacob's deceptions, he left but later returned and offered forgiveness to Jacob. Their meeting was tense but seemingly cordial. Esau returned to the Seir (another name for Edom based on the Seir mountains on the east of Edom). Both brothers buried their father, suggesting they were on reasonable terms, and the extensive genealogy of Esau in Genesis 36 suggests that his family was still an important branch of Abraham's descendants.

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[297] Thomas V. Briscoe, "Edom," in *New International Dictionary of Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997). Note that most of this historical analysis of relations with Edom is based on this dictionary entry.

After the exodus from Egypt, rules about who may be included in the assembly of the Lord mention Edomites: "Do not despise an Edomite, for the Edomites are related to you. … The third generation of children born to them may enter the assembly of the Lord." (Deut 23 7-8). However, relations became more strained over the centuries. Edom is listed as one of the enemies whom Saul fought against (1 Sam 14:47). King David conquered Edom (2 Sam 8:14), but they later revolted under Jehoram's rule (2 Kings 8:20), which is the earlier possible dating for Obadiah. The next 150 years saw conflicts between Edom and Judah over trade routes to the south, with Edom growing in strength, expanding further west and controlling more of the key trade routes.

In the prophetic literature, Edom is condemned more than any other nation, even more than Assyria and Babylon who conquered the northern and southern kingdoms. In addition to the oracle in Obadiah., there are many other prophetic proclamations, often as part of general oracles against the nations.[298]

The hostilities between Judah and Edom reached a head at the time of the invasion of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar around 586 BCE. Based on the various prophetic and historical proclamations against Edom, the following can be assumed as Judah's version of events. Jerusalem was besieged and attacked by the Babylonians. The Edomites did not come to Judah's assistance, but stood back and watched Jerusalem's destruction, and then

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[298] They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west; together they will plunder the people to the east. They will subdue Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites will be subject to them. (Isa 14:11)
My sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; see, it descends in judgment on Edom, the people I have totally destroyed. … Edom's streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulphur; her land will become blazing pitch! (Isa 34:5,9)
Edom will become an object of horror; all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff because of all its wounds. … Like a lion coming up from Jordan's thickets to a rich pastureland, I will chase Edom from its land in an instant. (Jer 49:17,19)
Your punishment will end, Daughter Zion; he will not prolong your exile. But he will punish your sin, Daughter Edom, and expose your wickedness. (Lam 4:22)
Because Edom took revenge on Judah and became very guilty by doing so, therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will stretch out my hand against Edom and kill both man and beast. I will lay it waste, and from Teman to Dedan they will fall by the sword. I will take vengeance on Edom by the hand of my people Israel, and they will deal with Edom in accordance with my anger and my wrath; they will know my vengeance, declares the Sovereign Lord.' (Ezek 25:12-14)
But Egypt will be desolate, Edom a desert waste, because of violence done to the people of Judah, in whose land they shed innocent blood. (Joel 3:19)
This is what the Lord says: "For three sins of Edom, even for four, I will not relent. Because he pursued his brother with a sword and slaughtered the women of the land, because his anger raged continually and his fury flamed unchecked, I will send fire on Teman that will consume the fortresses of Bozrah." (Amos 1: 11-12)
Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins." But this is what the Lord Almighty says: "They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the Lord. (Mal 1:4)

looted a defeated Jerusalem. Refugees escaping south from Jerusalem needed to pass through Edom, and the Edomites captured these refugees and sold them into slavery. Once Jerusalem had been sacked, Edom took the opportunity to expand their lands into former parts of Judah. Since Edom was supposed to act like a brother to Judah, and had made a treaty with Judah, this betrayal was doubly offensive, and hence the many oracles calling for the destruction of Edom.

In terms of literary structure, Obadiah consists of a single prophetic oracle, with a structure similar to many other prophetic oracles.

The oracle starts in v.1 with a superscription naming the author, Obadiah, followed by a message formula describing the source of the message (Lord God), the topic of the message (Edom) and the recipient of the message ("we have heard" and a "messenger sent to the nations"). This is followed by the prophetic message of judgement and restoration, which consists of the remainder of the book (vv. 2-21).

The prophetic message can be further broken down into an extended oracle of judgement and reversal directed, in the second person, at Edom. (vv. 2-16). This is followed by an oracle of retribution by Judah on Edom (vv. 17-18) and restoration for Judah (vv. 19-21).

The book has a relatively complex literary structure. Much of the book is an oracle against the Edomites and their betrayal of Judah, written in the second person directly addressed to Edom, and yet the audience for the reading and the re-reading of the book is more likely to be the Judahites either in exile or the remnant still living in Judah.[299] The likely purpose of the book is a lament for Judah, a curse on Edom for their treatment of Judah, and a promise for the restoration of all of the nation of Israel. The book moves from God's predicted judgement on Edom, to the nations including Judah being the deliverer of that judgement, and then to a unified Israel's restoration. The book is reassurance that the people of Judah have not been abandoned by God, but rather they will be restored as both God's people and the rightful inheritors of the whole land of Israel.

The meaning of the book for today's Christians depends upon what interpretive techniques are used. The eco-virtues approach allows aspects of human nature described in the ancient text to be reflected into our modern context. The key elements of the book are the

[299]Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Obadiah* (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 1996).

responsibility of Edom to protect its brother nation, the betrayal of that trust by not supporting Judah during the Babylonian invasion and even participating in Judah's destruction, the anger of God and the resulting punishment declared by God and prophesied to be enacted by the nations in proportion to Edom's sins ("As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head." v. 15), and finally, the restoration of the nation of Israel as a holy people faithfully serving in God's Kingdom (v. 21). Those Israelites who have been in exile will take possession of the lands in an extended Israelite kingdom, including Edom. This peaceful kingdom extends not just to Israelites but also to all who choose to live in peace, potentially including the remnant of Edom.

The final description of harmony in God's Kingdom seems at odds with what can look like open hatred of Edom in the remainder of Obadiah. The key point made in v. 21 is that any judgement belongs to God alone. If the enemies of God's Kingdom, epitomised in Obadiah as Edom, should attack us, then we are right to prophecy against their actions. Obadiah's prophecy includes a call for future military retribution on the enemies of God's people. However, a Christian reception of this text needs to consider that while evil should be acknowledged and condemned, we should "not repay anyone evil for evil." (Rom 12:17) Instead, we look to the eschatological perfection of God's kingdom when all can live together in peace. Additionally, the "you should not" prohibitives in Oba 12-14 act as a mirror for us to consider our own actions against others, all of whom should be treated like our neighbours.

## 5.3 History of Interpretation

Because of its small size and the very particular focus on one prophecy, Obadiah has been given less scholarly attention than many other prophetic books. Nevertheless, there is a long history of interpretation which is summarised briefly below.

Jerome's commentary from 403CE is typical of the patristic period.[300] As well as the literal meaning of the prophecy, Jerome looks to the fulfilment of the prophecy, particularly the restoration of Israel. This was partially accomplished with the rebuilding of the temple by Ezra and Nehemiah, but God's real return to Zion was accomplished with Christ's entrance to Jerusalem. Just as Edom's punishment is prophesied in Obadiah, this prophecy can also be

[300] Jerome, "Commentary on Obadiah," (403), accessed 29 July 2021. https://sites.google.com/site/aquinasstudybible/home/obadiah/st-jerome-on-obadiah--latin. (Note this is in Latin, so automated translation was used to get the broad message of this commentary).

applied to the enemies of the Christian church who cannot succeed in destroying the church despite their armies, or political might. The true Kingdom of God is the Church headed by Jesus Christ and it will live forever.

Similar interpretations appear during the Reformation, but with a different group seen as the enemies of the church. Calvin's Commentary on the Bible includes a detailed analysis of Obadiah. Calvin's preference for a literal interpretation means that his analysis follows much the same analysis as has been presented in the conventional commentary above. The departure comes in his analysis of the final few verses which deal with the restoration of God's Kingdom which Calvin sees very much as being fulfilled by Christ as the one who ushered in the new Kingdom of God. Additionally, his analysis reflects the reformer's concerns with the relative authority of the Church and God.

> But as it is certain, that it was God's purpose to rule among his people after having restored them, in no other way than by the power of Christ, the Prophet, by saying that the kingdom of Christ would be Jehovah's, means, that it would be really divine, and more illustrious than if he had employed the labour of men. But two things must be here observed by us, -- that God himself really rules in the person of Christ, -- and that it is the legitimate mode of ruling the Church, that God alone should preside, and hold alone the chief power.[301]

Calvin's conclusions mark this work as primarily a pastoral commentary, and this style of pastorally focussed commentary continued through the 19th century. For example, the early 18th-century commentator Matthew Henry sees both the literal meaning of the prophecy at the time the prophet was writing, but he also sees a modern parallel with the people of Judah as presenting the gospel-church and Edom representing Rome and any other enemies that would oppose the gospel-church. Just as Edom is confident in its abilities, the modern enemies of the Church put their trust in the wrong places.

> Do they depend upon their grandeur, the figure they make among the nations, their influence upon them, and interest in them? … Do they depend upon the fortifications of their country, both by nature and art, and glory in the advantages they have thereby? … Do they depend upon their wealth and treasure, the abundance of which is looked upon as the sinews of war? … Do they depend upon the politics

[301] Jean Calvin, "Calvin's Commentary on the Bible: Obadiah," Bible Hub, 2018, accessed 29 July 2021, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/obadiah/1.htm.

> of their counsellors? … Do they depend upon the strength and courage of their soldiers? … Edom shall certainly be subdued, and spoiled, and brought down for all her confidences shall fail her and stand her in no stead, and in like manner shall all the enemies of God's church be disappointed in those things which they stayed themselves upon.[302]

Academic (rather than pastoral or homiletic) commentaries on Obadiah have been appearing since the mid-20th century. Ehud Ben Zvi has produced one of the most comprehensive commentaries on Obadiah at over 300 pages.[303] It pays considerable attention to the grammar, poetic and prose structure, and includes comparisons with similar themes in books such as Hosea and Jeremiah. Ben Zvi finds that the ambiguities in the text are expected features of such a book:

> To begin with the most straightforward issues, this study has repeatedly pointed out that most of the "conundrums" posed by the text are resolved once the Book of Obadiah is taken as a prophetic book written to be (re)read and, accordingly, as one in which ambiguity, lasting indeterminacy, multiplicity of meanings informing one another and the like are in fact expected features of a text, whose role is to allow the book to serve its communicative purpose in the community/ies for which it was written.[304]

Ben Zvi infers that the complex textual structure indicates that the audience of readers was highly educated, in post-exilic Judah, with a particular concern to be identified as the rightful inheritors of Israel. These readers played the role of knowledge brokers for the broader, less literate community. In fact, he believes such was the audience for all the prophetic books. He believes Obadiah draws from a rich source of themes and motifs that are common throughout the prophetic books. Edom is singled out for judgement because of its unique status as a brother nation to Judah. Ben Zvi looks only at the historical aspects of Obadiah – he does not seek to impose any modern meaning for the text beyond its significance to its original readers.

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[302] Matthew Henry, "Obadiah in Commentary of the Whole Bible (1708-1710)," accessed 29 July 2021. https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/mhm/obadiah-1.html.
[303] Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Obadiah*.
[304] Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Obadiah*, 260.

Paul Raabe also has produced a substantial commentary on Obadiah.[305] Somewhat similar to Ben Zvi, the bulk of the commentary is a very detailed analysis of the text. He also provides an analysis of similarities to parts of Obadiah in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos and Malachi. Again, like Ben Zvi, he does not attempt to identify any meaning for the book beyond what it meant to its original readers.

John Renkema's commentary on Obadiah has a significant analysis of the literary structure of Obadiah, as well an extended verse by verse commentary.[306] Renkema emphasises the rhetorical nature of the punishments prophesied for Edom. These hyperbolic predictions do not, in fact, suggest everybody in Edom will be annihilated, but rather suggest the nation of Edom will cease to exist. For Renkema, one does not need to wait until the following book of Jonah to see God's forgiveness. The final verse regarding God ruling over his kingdom puts the rest of the book in context. "Edom shall not be confronted with a day of reckoning, but rather with a liberative justice and righteousness from YHWH, for it is thus that he rules the peoples."[307] Apart from this universally applicable statement about the nature of God's reign, Renkema's analysis does not comment on the meaning of Obadiah for the church today.

Hans Walter Wolff presents a detailed commentary on Obadiah.[308] He finds substantial differences in different prophecies about the retribution on Edom. For example, in v. 18 Edom is to be totally destroyed, whereas in v. 21 Mount Esau (Edom) is to be ruled over by the reunited Israelites, suggesting they are not totally destroyed.[309] He believes such differences suggest the book is a collection of judgements from different original sources. The unifying message of these is that Israel will be freed from domination to be part of God's Kingdom. He suggests that the book most likely had a cultic purpose in rites of lamentation following the Babylonian exile.

Wolff then investigates what this means for us today, especially in the light of Christ's incarnation. His message is still that God's kingdom will be one free from domination,

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[305] Paul R Raabe, *Obadiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 24D, Anchor Bible, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1996).
[306] Johan Renkema, *Obadiah*, vol. 15, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters 2003).
[307] Renkema, *Obadiah*, 15, 220.
[308] Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary* (Augsburg, Germany: Fortress Publishers, 1986).
[309] This assumes that Mount Esau is a metonym for the nation of Edom, and not a reference to a specific physical location.

retaliation and retribution, and the message of the New Testament is that this new kingdom will not be won militarily, but spiritually. The link between the history of Israel, the church and the history of nations is that all humanity is moving towards the kingdom of God to come, and meditation on these ancient prophecies of hope can provide comfort in times of discouragement.

Marvin Sweeney includes a short commentary on Obadiah as part of a series of commentaries on the minor prophets.[310] Sweeney goes a step further than some other commentators in believing not just that Edom had a responsibility as a brother nation, but that Edom broke a formal treaty that they had with Judah. For example, the cup on the holy mountain in verse 16 is not a cup of victory as some suggest, but rather a cup to seal a treaty, and just as Edom broke its treaty with Judah, its new allies will turn against them. Sweeney sees the destruction prophesied in Obadiah being tempered by the chance of forgiveness as afforded Assyria in the following book of Jonah. Sweeney does not investigate possible contemporary meaning for Obadiah for the church today.

James Nogalski investigates Obadiah as part of a larger commentary on the minor prophets.[311] His relatively short analysis does not look at the detailed meanings of individual verses but rather concentrates on the links that Obadiah has to other prophetic books, particularly Jeremiah 14:9,14-16, Amos 9 and Malachi 1:2-5.[312] Nogalski is one of a relatively recent group of scholars who have investigated the thematic unity of the Book of the Twelve, and his commentary looks at such unifying themes in some detail. His comments that the modern meaning of the text to Christians is around the image of a vengeful and fearsome God which "hardly resembles the warm, fuzzy portrayal of God one hears in most American pulpits."[313] Obadiah was not directed to an audience of wealthy, comfortable worshippers, but rather to a poor, suffering and defeated people, and in that context, the prophecies provided comfort and hope. "A God with the power to set things right provides a

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[310] Marvin A Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets (Vol. 1): Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002).
[311] James D. Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea-Jonah* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 363-397.
[312] Jeremiah 49 has sufficient strong parallels to Oba:1:1-5 that most commentators suggest Obadiah is either based on Jeremiah, or else shares a common source. Amos 9 shares many structural and thematic parallels with Obadiah. Malachi 1:2-5 (usually dated to mid-fifth century BCE) describes that Edom has already been destroyed as demonstration of God's love for Israel.
[313] Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea-Jonah* 376.

potent theological symbol to those in need. Yet such a God presents a frightening challenge to those who think they are in control."[314]

Nogalski sees the modern message of Obadiah as a call against those who today seek military power as a means of domination and security. Just as Christ declined to call on his angels to provide a military solution in the Garden of Gethsemane, so we should not depend on military might for our safety. Even though Obadiah may seem to be about retribution and vengeance, it is really about justice, faith, and hope. God can be depended on to work for justice in the world, and those who betray and destroy can expect to receive the same in return, while those who have been wronged will find restoration. "In a time when there are wars and rumours of wars, prophetic eschatology reminds us that hope for a changed world can only be found in God."[315]

Jason LeCureux has authored a dictionary entry on Obadiah.[316] Similar to Nogalski and Sweeney, he sees the message of Obadiah being tempered by the other prophecies in the Book of the Twelve. In particular, its message of judgement and destruction is tempered by Jonah's message of the possibility of repentance and forgiveness for the enemies of Israel.

> When Obadiah is read as part of the collection of the Book of the Twelve, the book, however, takes on a more symbolic meaning and emphasizes Yahweh's broader plan and purpose for the nations as a whole. The ultimate aim of his actions is to bring about their eventual repentance and inclusion into the eschatological kingdom of Zion.[317]

Apart from this universal message about the eschatological kingdom of God, LeCureux does not attempt to analyse the meaning of Obadiah in the context of today's church.

Samuel Pagçn's commentary on Obadiah identifies four major themes.[318] *Divine Justice* against Edom would confirm that God had not abandoned his people. *The Day of the Lord* began with judgement against Israel and would then result in judgement against Edom. God is the *Lord of History* and the subsequent destruction of Edom will not be a chance event but

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[314] Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea-Jonah* 377.
[315] Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea-Jonah* 396.
[316] Jason T. LeCureux, "Book of Obadiah," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J Boda and J Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 569-573.
[317] LeCureux, "Book of Obadiah," 572.
[318] Samuel Pagçn, "Obadiah," in *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. VII* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994-2004).

God's deliberate judgement. Divine intervention will result in Israel's restoration as part of the *Kingdom of the Lord*.

Pagçn's also reflects on issues from Obadiah that are relevant for today's church and today's believers. First, divine judgement is announced for Edom's betrayal of their neighbour, Judah, and Obadiah's prophecy challenges believers to identify and to care for the needy, the persecuted and the excluded in contemporary society. Second, Obadiah emphasises a theology of hope, in particular, the hope that in the face of calamity God remains in solidarity with his people. The church is challenged to mirror this hope by standing in solidarity with those today facing similar calamity through actions of justice and love. Third, the Kingdom of God is not just an eschatological idea, but rather believers are called to work towards programs that enact the Lord's Kingdom here on earth. Finally, in the same way that Obadiah's message contextualises prophetic promises to a post-exilic community, so God's message must be recontextualised to current societal issues. Pagçn identifies a particular challenge for late twentieth-century North America as the development of a multicultural and multilingual society and church that respects diversity, incorporates minorities and respects divergent opinions.

These recent academic treatments of Obadiah are focussed strongly on the literary structure of the text, its links and common themes with other prophetic books, and the likely meaning of the text to its original readers in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile. Only a few of the recent interpretations discuss links between Obadiah and the contemporary life of the Christian church, with the two exceptions. Nogalski's reflects on today's reliance on military might for security rather than reliance on God. Pagçn uses themes in Obadiah to reflect on the role of the church and believers in working towards the Kingdom of God as enacted through action for the poor, needy and dispossessed, supported by the hope that God accompanies his people as they work towards this Kingdom.

Both Nogalski and Pagçn identify broad themes in Obadiah and then reflect on how these might be applied today. There may be additional benefit in looking more closely at individual parts of the text and seeking contemporary applications. It is challenging to reflect on the possible modern application of this ancient prophetic text since it describes a specific historical conflict between specific ancient neighbouring kingdoms thousands of years ago. A new hermeneutical key, such as virtues and vices, may provide one method for supporting such reflection.

## 5.4 Existing Ecological Readings

There do not yet appear to be any eco-theological interpretations of Obadiah in the academic literature. However, there have been authors who have found environmental wisdom in other prophetic books. I have previously undertaken an ecological reading of Joel, looking at how the book can be used as a liturgy of lament and restoration.[319] The previously described work of Marlow on her "ecological triangle" uses texts from Amos, Hosea and first Isaiah.[320] These texts show that when there is a breakdown in one of these relationships, all suffer. When the God-human relationship, for example, suffers, this is reflected in a suffering creation.

The fourth volume of the Earth Bible project includes a significant number of eco-theological interpretations of prophetic books, based on Earth Bible interpretive principles.[321] There are contributions from Norman Charles (Is 24:6), Gunther Wittenberg (Jer 32), Keith Carley (Ezekiel), Kalinda Rose Stevenson (Ezek 6:35-36), Shirley Wurst (Jer 4), Laurie Braaten (Hos 2), Anne Gardner (Is 65:17) and John Olley (Isaiah). Although these contributions differ in their focus, a key unifying theme is listening to the voice of the Earth.

What is true of all these contributions above is that they focus on what might be called overt environmental imagery, such as droughts and plagues, the earth crying out, or the creation of new heavens and a new earth. Such imagery is scarce in Obadiah, and it is not surprising that there have not been ecological readings of this book. The newly proposed eco-virtues interpretive key uses a more indirect link between the text and the environment, so it may be more successful in extracting ecological wisdom. In the next section, overt ecological images will first be identified, although these have limited modern-day application. This will be followed by an eco-virtues reading, with more generally applicable themes around human greed and injustice.

### 5.4.1 Ecological Imagery in Obadiah

Obadiah has some limited descriptions of non-human creation that should be noted.

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[319] Bergmann, "Ecological Appropriation of Joel."
[320] Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, 109.
[321] Norman C Habel, ed., *Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, vol. 4 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

Your proud heart has deceived you,

you that live in the clefts of the rock,

whose dwelling is in the heights.

You say in your heart,

'Who will bring me down to the ground?' (Oba 3)

This verse has two images. The first is that the environment can provide shelter, protection and isolation. In this case, Edom's settlements in the rocky Seir mountains provide natural protection, especially Petra which is accessible only by a narrow ravine.

The second image is the contrast between the heights and the ground. "Ground" here has both a literal and metaphorical meaning. First, it represents the physical movement out of the protected hills onto the vulnerable plains, and second, it means being brought down in status from being close to heaven down to the ground. A common anthropocentric view of the earth is that social status is gained the further one is distanced from the ground.

Though you soar aloft like the eagle,

though your nest is set among the stars,

from there I will bring you down,

says the Lord. (Oba 4)

The eagle is a symbol of speed and strength that nests in high rocky places and attacks without warning from above. The fate of Edom to be reduced to the lowest status again is described as a movement away from heaven down to the ground.

If grape-gatherers came to you,

would they not leave gleanings? (Oba: 1:5b)

Here an agricultural image is used to represent the totality of Edom's destruction – nothing will be left behind when Edom will be pillaged.

those who ate your bread have set a trap for you (Oba 7c)

The image of shared food is used here as a sign of previous alliances that will be broken. Allies are expected to share food both symbolically (as in a shared feast) but also practically such as feeding the armies of allied forces when in one's territory.

> For as you have drunk on my holy mountain,
>
> all the nations around you shall drink;
>
> they shall drink and gulp down
>
> and shall be as though they had never been. (Oba 16)

This verse deals with the image of shared drink as a symbol of treaty and blessing, and also drinking the cup of judgement. Sharing food and drink is a sign of acceptance and community, both among friends but also symbolically among nations. Edom drank the cup of treaty and friendship with Judah, but now this has turned into a cup of judgement for them and for all the nations who participated in Judah's defeat.

> The house of Jacob shall be a fire,
>
> the house of Joseph a flame,
>
> and the house of Esau stubble;
>
> they shall burn them and consume them,
>
> and there shall be no survivor of the house of Esau;
>
> for the Lord has spoken. (Oba 18)

Here, the ecological image of fire is used to describe the defeat of Edom. The armies of Israel are seen as the consuming fire, and Edom is seen as stubble that will be burnt. It is not enough that the wealth of Edom is taken (represented implicitly by a crop of wheat), the remainder of Edom as a nation (the stubble) will also be destroyed. The image here is as fire as a destructive force, which is a metaphor for God's judgement. In the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar's commander "set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down." (2 Kings 25:8)

Although the vast majority of images of fire in the OT refer to fire as a devouring force of God's judgement, fire is also used as an image of a refining and purifying force.

In the whole land," declares the Lord,

"two-thirds will be struck down and perish;

yet one-third will be left in it.

This third I will put into the fire;

I will refine them like silver

and test them like gold.

They will call on my name

and I will answer them;

I will say, 'They are my people,'

and they will say, 'The Lord is our God.' (Zech 13:8-9)

So, this fire in Obadiah 18 can also be seen as a purifying force that will equip the surviving Edomites to be members of the holy people who serve in God's kingdom.

Those of the Negeb shall possess Mount Esau,

and those of the Shephelah the land of the Philistines;

they shall possess the land of Ephraim and the land of Samaria,

and Benjamin shall possess Gilead.

The exiles of the Israelites who are in Halah

shall possess Phoenicia as far as Zarephath;

and the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad

shall possess the towns of the Negeb. (Oba 18-19)

The background ecological theme here is that the land is something to be "possessed." Favour in God's eyes is accompanied by possession of the land, in particular, the restoration of the nation of Israel is tightly tied to their occupation of the promised land.

Those who have been saved shall go up to Mount Zion

to rule Mount Esau;

and the kingdom shall be the Lord's. (Oba 21)

The image of Mount Zion as representing the whole of Judah and Mount Esau representing the whole of Edom appears here and at several other places in Obadiah. This emphasises the implicit correlation of physical height and closeness to heaven and God. Only the top of a mountain is a suitable dwelling place for God.

These ecological images are rather limited and attempts to use them for an ecological reading are likely to be quite speculative. The new eco-virtues approach provides an alternative way to look for ecological wisdom.

## 5.5 An Eco-Virtues Reading of Obadiah

### 5.5.1 Virtues and Vices in the Text

The first step in the eco-virtues methodology is to identify the virtues and vices in the text, including the particular context in which these occur. This is followed by looking for parallels to how those virtues and vices are manifest in the current ecological crisis, and then how this knowledge might frame the Church's response. In this case, it is more convenient to consider virtues and vices as they appear in the book as a whole, rather than proceeding verse by verse.

The actions for which Edom will be punished cover a wide range of vices. Edom's actions in failing to come to Judah's aid show a **lack of love** for their brother nation. Since it is likely that there was a formal treaty between the nations (alluded to by the cup on the holy mountain in v. 16), this lack of help also exhibits **injustice**. Rather than formally being part of the attacking army of Babylon, Edom firstly stood by and gloated over Judah's defeat, and then entered the defeated Jerusalem to loot the city, and they also captured fleeing fugitives to sell into slavery, both of which display **cowardice** and also **greed** (i.e., **intemperance**). The fact that Edom thought that they could be part of the looting and destruction without any expected consequences shows **foolishness** (**imprudence)**. They should have expected such retribution from a just God, but instead, their reasoning was impeded by their **pride**, which they felt made them safe in their mountain strongholds, and secure in their alliances with other nations. Their **faith was misplaced** in their political alliances, military strength, secure fortresses and a defeated enemy, rather than in God.

The virtues in the book almost all belong to God. The theme of divine **justice** runs through Oba 1-15, summarized by "As you have done, it shall be done to you." (v. 15) This **justice** applies not just to the prophesied judgement of Edom, but also to the preceding Babylonian attack on Jerusalem which is seen as God's **justice** for an **unfaithful** Judah. However, the situation for both Judah and for Edom is balanced by God's **faithfulness** to his promises of **love** and mercy that are described in Oba 16-21 culminating in the eschatological promise of God's kingdom. Therefore, those in Judah can have **hope** that their nation will be restored, and those in Edom may lose their nation, but they also can have **hope** that if they repent, they will be saved and have a place in the restored kingdom.

### 5.5.2 Reflections of these Vices and Virtues in the Ecological Crisis

Although it has been stated earlier, it is worth repeating that the eco-virtues approach is not meant to theologically support the scientific facts of the ecological crisis – these are assumed to be well known. It is also not intended to give a set of environmental actions that could remediate the crisis. It is also acknowledged that responding to the crisis will require a radical change to a sustainable way of life for all humanity. Rather, the insights from this interpretation are intended to provide reasons why humanity, especially those Christians in developed nations, are either choosing not to believe clear scientific evidence or else are unwilling to take actions to change unsustainable lifestyles, and to encourage changed behaviours.

Obadiah gives a detailed description of the ways in which Edom responded to Jerusalem's defeat by the Babylonians, and it is useful to reflect on the virtues and vices enumerated above in the context of the ecological crisis. The **unjust**, **unloving**, **deceitful**, **greedy** and **proud** Edom is reflected in the same vices displayed in our western society (individually and collectively) and the suffering Judah is reflected in a suffering creation.[322]

The Edomites showed **injustice** and a **lack of love** towards their sibling nation of Judah with whom they had at least a special historical bond, and most likely a formal treaty. Humans are similarly joined together with the Earth in a covenant relationship with God. A common theme throughout many biblical covenants is that they are not just a covenant between God and humans, but rather a covenant between God and all creation including humans. In

[322] The type of a suffering Judah can also be reflected in the antitype of the world's poorest people, who contribute least to problems such as climate change but are likely to suffer disproportionately from their effects.

reference to the Noahic covenant after the flood, "So God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.' " (Gen 9:17). The covenant with Abraham includes promises that Abraham will have many descendants, and also that those descendants will be linked to the land of Canaan. (Gen 17:4-8) The blessings and curses in the Mosaic covenant in Deuteronomy contrast a fruitful environment if the covenant is kept and a suffering environment when the covenant is broken.[323] In Romans, Paul links the liberation of creation with the freedom of the children of God.[324] Humanity is called to care for creation, just as Edom was called to care for Judah. The lack of care for creation today either means that Christians are **foolishly** unaware of their covenantal responsibilities, or they choose to **unjustly** break that covenant. The book of Obadiah describes both the brotherly responsibilities of Edom and the ways in which these responsibilities were ignored. Likewise, the prophesying Church today is called to declare our responsibilities to care for creation, and to declare how we have failed those responsibilities. While this has been done with powerful statements by Christian leaders, there is considerable scope for this to be more widely proclaimed in individual faith communities.

The Edomites exhibited the vice of **intemperance** in the form of **greed** when they looted a defeated Jerusalem. Humanity's current unsustainable lifestyle is essentially a **greedy intemperate** lifestyle. Given an abundance of resources that can make our lives more comfortable and allow us to accumulate more wealth, we are quick to take advantage of creation's riches, despite the cost to the environment now and into the future. We are quick to yield to the temptation to consume more and more. This is not just a personal vice; it is also a societal and political problem. Our economic system is based on an impossibly flawed and **foolish** model of continual growth. In modern politics, possibly the worst outcome for a

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[323] In Deut 11, blessings include autumn and spring rains leading to grass for cattle and harvests of grain, new wine and oil. By contrast, curses include lack of rain, and therefore lack of any produce. The temple prayer in Deut 16:15 links the people and the land: "Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel and the land you have given us as you promised on oath to our ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey." The blessings in Deut 28 include an abundant harvest, and healthy calves and lambs, but the curses in the same chapter include drought, plagues of locusts, crop failures, loss of calves and lambs, hunger and thirst, and finally exile from the promised land.

[324] "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." (Rom 8: 18-21)

government is a reduction in production and consumption, or a so-called recession. Yet we clearly need to consume fewer resources if our lifestyles are to become sustainable.

The Edomites also displayed **cowardice** in choosing not to help their brother nation, and after Judah's defeat, Edom responded by looting the defeated Jerusalem and capturing and selling fleeing refugees into slavery. The Christian church also displays a **lack of courage** in its response to the environmental crisis. For example, although the scientific bases of climate change predictions are very solid, and although the theology of our covenantal responsibilities to care for creation seem clear, creation care is not a priority in many faith communities. Because we are all embedded within an unsustainable lifestyle, we are afraid of being called hypocrites if we call to change that lifestyle. Perhaps there is a fear that environmental care is a political issue, not a theological issue, and this is not an issue the church should prioritise. There is likely to be a range of views towards climate change in any faith community, and so perhaps faith leaders do not have the **courage** to acknowledge these divisions. Action on environmental issues may be seen by more socially conservative Christians as a component of a progressive Christian agenda, along with issues such as inclusivity and equality of gender and sexuality differences, anti-consumerism, and indigenous rights. If the whole progressive Christianity agenda is rejected, then so is environmental action. Therefore, the challenge for those in faith communities and especially their leaders is to examine the issue of creation care seriously and **wisely** and then to have the **courage** to act in accordance with their beliefs and understandings.

The Edomites also exhibited another form of intemperance in the form of **pride,** which can also be seen as **misplaced faith** in their own strength. They believed that they had military strength, naturally fortified strongholds, and solid military alliances to protect them. Modern western society is also a very proud society. We believe that our current lifestyle is built on strong democratic foundations of our own making, it is built on strong immigration policies that reject many refugees and others seen as a burden, it is built on strong global alliances with like-minded societies, and it is confident in the power of science and technology to solve problems without impacting our standard of living. This **pride** is misplaced, foolish and dangerous. Confident in humanity's ability to transform an unruly creation into a storehouse of resources for our use, we are failing to act **prudently** to change the nature of our society to one that lives in harmony with nature. Christian faith communities have an important role here to promote a spirit of ecological **humility**. Rather than trust in our own abilities, we need to place our faith in God to change our hearts and minds to want to live sustainably.

Blinded by their **pride**, and driven by their **greed**, the Edomites acted with **foolishness** when they thought their actions would go unpunished. They should have expected God's **justice**: "As you have done, it shall be done to you." (v 15) It now seems certain that in the coming decades humanity will suffer the inevitable consequences of our mistakes around our relationship with creation. Technological progress has run far ahead of any serious consideration of the consequences to the environment. New technologies are being used to extract fossil fuels in the form of shale oil and coal seam gas even though science also tells us that burning all these reserves will cause major damage to ecosystems and island nations, and increase the frequency and severity of natural disasters such as cyclones and bushfires.[325] The more that faith communities discuss the inevitable consequences of **foolish** lifestyles, and the more that they endorse both secular and religious **prudent** voices that call for environmental action, the sooner some change is likely to occur. Faith communities also have a responsibility to examine their own environmental footprint and take prophetic actions to demonstrate their covenantal relationship with creation. Most likely, the Edomites only regretted their foolish actions when their own nation was attacked and occupied. There is a good chance that action on the environmental crisis will only become decisive when environmental damage has become dire.

The final section of Obadiah (vv.17-21) sees a call for the judgement and destruction of the nation of Edom and restoration of God's dispossessed exiles to their place as God's chosen people. This extended Israelite restoration did not occur historically, but it can be interpreted eschatologically as the hope of final restoration of all God's people in a peaceful kingdom that will be the Lord's.[326] The virtues displayed in Obadiah are the Christian virtues which are gifts of God. Steadfast **love** by God for God's people, **faith** in a God who cares for God's people, and **hope** in a God who is always working with God's people to redeem humanity and liberate creation. The consequences of the current ecological crisis are likely to get worse before they get better. Already there are many, especially children, who are depressed and despairing at the prospect of an uncertain future.[327] Here the church has a key role to maintain a spirit of **hope** and joy. The Bible has many texts that speak of maintaining a spirit of **hope** and joy in desperate times, whether they be during the Babylonian exile, or during

[325] Also called hurricanes or typhoons and wildfires or forest fires in other countries.
[326] God's people in Obadiah are the Israelites, but in a Christian reading God's people extends to all believers, Jews and Gentiles.
[327] Pihkala Panu, "Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety," *Sustainability* 12, no. 19 (2020).

the persecution of early Christians. Only when people are filled with **faith, hope** and **love**, are they able to act **wisely, justly, humbly** and **courageously** to respond to the current ecological crisis.

## 5.6 Critical Analysis of the New Approach

Initially, Obadiah appears to be an unusual text to choose when looking for wisdom about the ecological crisis. It has limited images of creation. Its content initially appears very specific to one event, viz., Edom's behaviour towards its brother nation Judah during and after the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and the consequent judgement prophesied against Edom. The prophecy appears to have been written down for use in exilic and post-exilic ceremonies of lamentation and awaited restoration.

The new eco-virtues approach can make good use of the text in contemporary ecological reflection.

In the current ecological crisis, the prevailing economic model of unsustainable consumption is driven by greed for earthly wealth and comfort, and pride in our ability to overcome any problems. We are acting unjustly towards a creation in which we are in a covenantal relationship. The consequences of our current lifestyle seem clear, yet we foolishly ignore the prudent path of immediate action to live more sustainably.

For Christian communities, this points to several possible actions. First, our lifestyle choices and their treatment of the environment depends on the strength of our commitment to environmental care. Christian worship, education and praxis all need to emphasise our covenant responsibility to creation.

Secondly, faith communities need to have the wisdom and courage to prophecy about our responsibility to better care for creation, lament about our past actions, and look forward with hope to a more sustainable future. The social, political, governmental and corporate forces that seek to maintain the status quo have much to lose, but rather than stand by as the environment suffers from these forces, Christians are called to act on behalf of the environment, not the status quo.

Thirdly, Christians are called to embody hope for a just future in which all humanity and all creation can live more harmoniously. Obadiah gives an eschatological vision of all the nations being joined in God's kingdom. We can add that all creation will also live in peace and harmony in God's kingdom. There will likely be considerable pain and upheaval as the

consequences of climate change, pollution and loss of biodiversity play out in the coming decades. God's people have withstood significant times of defeat and persecution in the past. The church needs to continue to offer hope of restoration and salvation in times of trouble.

The above analysis confirms that new theological insights from unexpected sources such as Obadiah are possible when we look past the specific setting of a text to the underlying virtues and vices displayed by the actors in the text. By analysing these fundamental drivers of human behaviour, valuable new insights are found that are applicable to the specific modern problems of the ecological crisis.

# Chapter 6 Ecological Discipleship Resources

## 6.1 Design of Small Group Bible Studies

The purpose of designing discipleship small group Bible studies is to provide a vehicle for incorporating the proposed virtues-based interpretive technique into ecological discipleship formation programs. It is outside the scope of this thesis to undertake a detailed review of educational theory and Christian educational practice, or to evaluate the educational impact of a particular set of studies on a particular set of participants, or to compare different approaches to ecological discipleship programs.

Instead, an example set of Bible study resources will be developed which combine the newly proposed virtues-based interpretive technique with current good practice in Christian education. Such a set of studies will have three key design components, as follows.

Firstly, the theological and philosophical background of virtues and vices, and the moral philosophy framework of Virtue Ethics are assumed not to be widely known among Bible study participants, and so some introductory study material on virtues and vices will be necessary.

Secondly, the eco-virtues interpretive technique will be used for the two passages analysed in detail in chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis (Prodigal Son and Obadiah).

Thirdly, a particular framework for Christian education will be chosen to guide the structure of the Bible study materials. As described earlier, a detailed comparison of different approaches is not part of this thesis, instead, one well-accepted technique is chosen, viz. Thomas Groome's approach which he calls *Shared Praxis*.[328] This approach includes five stages, or what Groome calls Movements. The praxis orientation of the technique matches well with goals to encourage creation care action.

Movement 1 is *Naming and Expressing Present Praxis*, effectively asking participants to identify their current beliefs and practice. Movement 2 is *Critical Reflection on Present Action*, which critically examines beliefs from movement 1. Movement 3 is *Making Available Christian Story and Vision* which in our context refers to examining the themes of virtues and

[328] Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998).

vices within scripture. Movement 4 is *Dialectical Hermeneutic to Appropriate Christian Story to Participants' Stories*, which in the new interpretive technique corresponds to the application phase of reflecting biblical virtues and vices into the current ecological crisis. Movement 5 is *Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith*, which encourages participants to consider changes in behaviour.

In summary, the structure of group Bible study materials will use insights from scripture (in the case of this project, ecological insights from scripture) to encourage group participants to discuss and reflect on their current practice and consider changes in practice that are more consistent with sustainable lifestyles and care for creation.

## 6.2 Structure of Bible Studies

The Bible study materials themselves consist of seven study guides that cover Groome's movements across the series of studies, but also have elements of the 5 movements within each study.

The study materials themselves appear in Appendix A. Each is designed to be undertaken in a session of about 90 minutes, with a study leader facilitating open-ended group reflection and discussion. There are not right and wrong answers, instead, participants learn from the range of different viewpoints of colleagues as well as benefitting from critical reflection on their own beliefs. The seven studies cover the following topics.

*Study 1:* Relationships between God, Humanity and Non-Human Creation. This study asks participants to reflect on the meaning and purpose of creation, and our relationship to creation. Some different possible models, based on key ecological Bible texts are used to encourage discussion.

*Study 2:* Introduction to Virtues and Vices – Wisdom and Justice. Over the next three studies, the concepts of Virtues and Vices are introduced, using biblical texts that highlight these virtues and their corresponding vices. Ecological applications are also introduced.

*Study 3:* Virtues of Temperance and Courage.

*Study 4:* Theological Virtues: Faith, Hope and Love.

*Study 5:* The new virtues-based interpretive technique is used in the context of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, looking at how the ethical themes from the ancient text can be reconsidered in the context of the modern ecological crisis.

*Study 6.* The new interpretive technique is similarly applied to Obadiah.

*Study 7:* A wrap-up study that gives an opportunity to reflect on new understandings and how might these be applied in practical contexts.

## 6.3 Deployment

Early versions of these studies have been used within the context of a longer series of creation-care Bible studies undertaken by a Brisbane inner-city discipleship Bible-study group during 2020. As mentioned earlier, there is not intended to be any formal evaluation of this deployment.

The Bible study materials are provided as examples of how the new interpretive technique could be used to facilitate ecological discipleship formation, rather than as a definitive framework for such studies.

Formal evaluation will be an analytical analysis as presented in the next chapter.

# Chapter 7 Ecological Discipleship Resources – Analysis

This chapter will analyse the potential effectiveness of the small group Bible studies based on Bock's analysis of the characteristics of effective Watershed (ecological) discipleship programs.[329] The discussion below will discuss the degree of alignment of the new interpretive method as encapsulated in the set of small group Bible study resources by considering Bock's characteristics one by one. A short summary of each characteristic is given in italics at the start of each section.

The range of insights that individuals would gain from participating in such a set of Bible studies depends not only on the study resources, but also on the leadership of the group, the particular discussions and reflections encountered at group level, each individual's level of engagement and interest, and also their existing backgrounds in creation care. For the purposes of this analysis, the insights are assumed to be similar to those presented in the detailed analyses in chapter 4 and chapter 5. The following sections consider each characteristic in turn, including Bock's explanations of these terms listed in italics.

## 7.1 Praxis

*When approaching biblical texts, watershed practitioners look for reflections of the textual themes in their lived experience in their own watershed.*

Eco-virtues biblical reflection explicitly links biblical texts with the current ecological crisis using the timeless nature of virtues and vices to reflect on the texts. Virtues and vices constitute the textual themes that are re-appropriated for modern ecological reflection, and this ecological reflection is linked to the disciple's lived experience both at the beginning of scriptural reflection and afterwards through Groome's shared praxis model. This model begins with a reflection on current praxis, moves through shared reflection on both that current praxis and on biblical themes around virtues and vices and these then lead towards new actions in creation care.

[329] Bock, "Watershed Discipleship: Communicating Climate Change within a Christian Framework: A Case Study Analysis," 168.

## 7.2 Recovering Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Scripture

*This focuses on ancient practices such as Sabbath and Jubilee "which encourage right relationship with one's community, land, animals, those outside one's community and God."*

Sabbath and Jubilee are dealt with in study 2 as examples of biblical wisdom. Another term for traditional ecological knowledge would be ecological wisdom or prudence, and such a virtue is a focus of biblical reflection in the eco-virtues approach. Using virtues and vices as an interpretive lens allows a much wider range of texts to be considered for sources of wisdom that are relevant to our current ecological crisis, not just those very explicit ecological texts such as Sabbath and Jubilee.

The emphasis in the exegetical phase of analysis is to consider the broad spread of biblical knowledge about the virtuous and vicious aspects of human moral choices.

## 7.3 Learning Social-Ecological Memories

*This implies recovering ecological images in scripture, such as the river of life, or what Myers calls Redemption as Rehydration.*[330]

Ecological images are used frequently in depicting the nature of biblical virtues as well as vices. Examples of such images used explicitly in the introductory studies include justice like a river (Amos 5:24), human foolishness like a chasing after the wind (Eccl 1:12-18), or like an ox being led to slaughter (Prov 7:22), while courage is likened to the heart of a lion (2 Sam 17:10).

The eco-virtues method, however, does not concentrate so much on explicit ecological images, but rather provides a framework for considering ethical narratives and images that appear in scripture and relating them to the same aspects of human nature evident in our relationship with creation.

## 7.4 Environmental Justice

*This involves learning about historical and present-day local environmental issues and working towards remedying them.*

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[330] Myers, "Prophetic Visions of Redemption as Rehydration: A Call to Watershed Discipleship."

The eco-virtues approach provides a method for looking at the widespread biblical themes of justice, especially to the poor and dispossessed, and relating them to modern parallels in both the way the environment is mistreated and the fact that those people who contribute least to ecological damage are often the ones with the fewest resources to adapt to local damaged environments. There are significant examples of unjust actions in the two passages considered in detail, and the eco-virtues method looks first at identifying these injustices in their original context and reflecting on how these same behaviours are evident today in the ecological crisis.

## 7.5 Re-placing and Reinhabiting

*This involves solidarity with communities that are impacted by environmental degradation. Reinhabiting recognizes that discipleship involves actively inhabiting a space and caring for that locality.*

This area is dealt with indirectly through consideration of how justice and injustice are manifested in humanity's interaction with creation, but also in how ecological injustice disproportionately affects the poor.

In the consideration of what actions might be taken to improve our sustainability (study 7), there is a particular emphasis on what we can do locally, as part of our local Christian community.

## 7.6 Social-ecological Systems and Services

*This involves understanding of the complex interconnections between social and economic systems and the ecological systems, for example by supporting local, sustainable agriculture.*

Modern ecological wisdom includes acknowledgement of the role of modern science in naming hard ecological truths and also includes the courage to accept these truths, rather than be foolishly misled by common misconceptions and myths that run counter to scientific consensus.

## 7.7 Biblical Rhetorical Style

*This means framing ecological issues in terms of commonly understood biblical motifs such as prayer, psalms, laments and prophesy. It also involves a prophetic ministry of speaking truth to power by highlighting environmental injustice.*

The eco-virtues approach allows a broad range of different biblical genres to be examined for the virtues and vices that are present. These different genres give different insights into human nature, both at an individual level (as in the Prodigal Son) and at community and national levels (as in Obadiah). Through this different interpretive lens, readers focus on unfamiliar aspects of stories that might otherwise be relegated to the background. Using biblical stories to frame creation-care discussions makes good use of biblical rhetorical style.

## 7.8 Christian Language

*This focuses on terms such as creation, confession, forgiveness, salvation and redemption, which are terms common to Christians, although often restricted to concerns about humans. It involves using concepts and stories from the Bible to draw ecological meaning and truth.*

Particularly the theological virtues of faith, hope and love bring a uniquely Christian perspective to the problems of the ecological crisis and enable a uniquely Christian perspective. Recognising ecological vices that are inherent in dominant socio-economic models allows for reflection on what this means for Christian praxis. Biblical themes such as temperance, humility, hope, justice and love for neighbour can provide motivation for Christian action in situations that might seem hopeless. Eschatological hope can overcome earthly despair, and love for all directs Christians away from conflict towards actions of reconciliation.

## 7.9 Liturgical Rhythms allow Movement toward Pro-environmental Behaviour

*While many people may express fear, dismay, anxiety or grief around the ecological crisis, Christians are uniquely equipped with tools to express these through liturgies of lament, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation.*

One of the discussion areas in the final study 7 is how care for creation can be made more explicit in the life of Christian communities, including areas such as liturgy. As well as Bible study, discipleship small groups provide forums for mutual support, group prayer, and personal care and comfort. Small group Bible studies are a key component of many small groups, so incorporating ecological themes in such studies can reach a wider range of potential participants, not just those who would sign up for additional, specific ecological discipleship programs.

## 7.10 Localizing the Liturgy

*This involves tying the rites and sacraments of Christian worship more tightly into the local community. Examples might be baptisms in a local river, communion using locally grown produce, or worship services outside amongst creation.*

The eco-virtues studies ask participants to consider how to incorporate aspects of creation care into their actions. This could include these ways of linking creation more explicitly to community activities, although this is not a primary focus of the studies.

## 7.11 Summary

Overall, the strength of the eco-virtues approach is that it links the study of scripture with consideration of our lifestyles and ecological praxis. There is a solid thread through the above characteristics which emphasise the link between creation care and the existing sources of theological understanding – scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. In particular, the link between scripture and praxis is strong. The eco-virtues approach provides a starting point for this link, encouraging disciples to look at how the ethical themes of scripture are reflecting in the modern ecological crisis, particularly using virtues and vices to link ancient stories with modern contexts.

Overall, this approach appears well aligned with the best-practice in ecological discipleship, while providing a new suite of resources for encouraging biblically-based discussions on this important topic.

# Chapter 8 Conclusions

## 8.1 Summary of Outcomes

The aims of the thesis are to investigate a new interpretive technique for finding ecological wisdom from scripture and also to use this technique in the development of ecological discipleship resources. These aims were solidified into two research questions, and the answers to these are considered one by one.

***Research Question 1. How can the principles of Virtue Ethics be used as an interpretive lens for finding ecological wisdom in a variety of biblical genres?***

Researchers including Conradie and Horrell have looked at different interpretive lenses for understanding the ecological wisdom in scripture. Conradie continues to investigate the interpretive lens of Earth as the household of God.[331] Horrell proposes a broader set of biblical ecological motifs: the goodness of all creation; humanity as part of the community of creation; interconnectedness in failure and flourishing; God's covenant with all creation; creation's calling to praise God; and liberation and reconciliation for all things.[332]

This project uses a different interpretive lens based on the premise that both the problems and the potential solutions for the current ecological crisis are bound up with human ethical choices, which in turn are affected by fallen human nature. While those biblical texts that deal explicitly with creation are limited, much of scripture deals with this fallen human condition. Against this background, scripture is a rich reservoir of wisdom and experience that can be useful when reflecting on creation care.

A review of contemporary ecological ethics, and in particular drawing upon Bouma-Prediger's use of Environmental Virtue Ethics in motivating and encouraging what he calls *Earthkeeping*, suggests that Virtue Ethics is an area of significant interest in both secular and Christian environmental ethics, and so this framework is used to investigate new ways of reading scripture for ecological wisdom.[333]

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[331]Conradie, *The Earth in God's Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective*.
[332] Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology*.
[333] Bouma-Prediger, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic*.

To avoid a narrowly circular reading of scripture that looks for hidden ecological wisdom which simply reinforces our existing beliefs, the proposed interpretive method is deliberately in two separate stages. The first stage is centred on the text itself and seeks to identify virtues and vices in the context of the original audience. The original context is important because it is this context that provides a nuanced understanding of the virtues and vices. For example, when the prodigal son chooses to return home with hope for his father's acceptance, it is in the context of his current situation of starvation and hopelessness. Prior to that, his pride and cowardice prevented him from trusting in that hope.

The second stage is the application step. This is a reflective and imaginative step that looks for parallels between the virtues and vices in the biblical text, and the way those same virtues and vices are relevant to human causes and responses to the ecological crisis. Using the same example above, the prodigal son's hope is firstly a comfort to those in distress about the current ecological crisis, that God's care and protection are always available. Secondly, it is a warning that human nature means we are often slow to look to God's care and protection until the situation is dire and our own resources are exhausted, and so a key component of responsible creation care is to accept the seriousness of the current ecological crisis.

This eco-virtues interpretive method is not a new ecological hermeneutics, per se. Rather it is an application of a virtues-based approach to biblical hermeneutics that is then applied to ecological questions. It provides an alternative to standard ecological hermeneutical or virtue ethics approaches to ecological problems. Compared to more general virtue ethics approaches to ecological issues it provides a more direct link to scripture and, compared to standard ecological hermeneutical approaches, it allows consideration of a wider range of biblical texts.

To demonstrate the method, two different texts have been investigated using the eco-virtues method. This method has provided a significant new mechanism for reflecting on humanity's relationship with creation in the context of the current ecological crisis. It provides a new way of challenging our personal and communal understandings of the role of Christian individuals and communities in creation care in the context of biblical examples of ethical and unethical behaviour.

Chapters 4 and 5 describe the new ecological insights that are possible with this method. A selection of the more significant and original insights from the analysis of the Prodigal Son are summarised here.

The parable of the Prodigal Son begins with the son's request for his share of the father's estate. The son's request is greedy, unjust and lacks love. By contrast, the father's granting of his request shows love and generosity, yet it might also be considered unwise. When applied to the current ecological crisis, these same themes can be contemplated. In love and generosity, God has given stewardship of his good creation to humanity, even when we do not exercise that stewardship wisely. Like the son, humanity seems to assume greedily that God's gift is for our sole current pleasure, and not for the continued livelihood of future generations.

The son's exit to a foreign land shows cowardice in not living with the consequences of his unjust, greedy and unloving actions. Similarly, it is easier for us to retreat into the comfort of a global culture of overconsumption and unsustainability than to accept the sinfulness of such a lifestyle.

The son's intemperance, combined with the foolishness of squandering all his resources lead to his rejection and near starvation. The current lack of urgent action on serious ecological problems is similarly foolish and intemperate. For example, scientific consensus predicts dire consequences from insufficient action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels, but few governments have had the courage to act decisively.

Eventually, in desperate circumstances, the son has the wisdom and hope to trust in his father's love and forgiveness. His pride is replaced with humility, and his cowardice is replaced with courage. In the context of the ecological crisis, this suggests an important step is to acknowledge the seriousness of the current situation. Although we are not yet starving, we need the wisdom and courage to acknowledge the ecological damage that is currently occurring. On the other hand, the Christian virtue of hope in a loving and caring God means that we have the confidence and courage to act.

The primary role of the father in the parable is as a loving father seeking reconciliation and restored community. A distinctive part of the Christian response to the ecological crisis is then that solutions are about restoring loving relationships between each other, and between humanity and creation. This is in contrast to secular responses which are often oppositional and even confrontational, similar to the response of the prodigal son's older brother.

The study of the book of Obadiah similarly leads to novel insights into human nature and its relationship with creation, which are dealt with in detail in the Chapter 5 summary.

***Research Question 2. How well do small group Bible study resources based on this interpretive method align with existing best-practice in ecological discipleship formation?***

Ecological discipleship is used to refer to the actions of Christian disciples (i.e., followers of Christ) in our relationship to creation. Discipleship formation involves that teaching and practice which supports and encourages lifestyles that more closely follow God's will. It encourages life in the kingdom of heaven on earth, rather than following the values of the secular world. As Paul tells the Romans: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom 12:2).

Discipleship small groups are an important component of discipleship encouragement for many Christians, and small group Bible studies are used extensively in such groups for discerning the will of God within a safe and supportive community. However, there is a dearth of small group Bible studies in the area of ecological discipleship, and so one way to make the virtues-based ecological readings of scripture available outside an academic environment is to embed this method in a series of Bible study resources.

Such a set of studies appears in Appendix A, as an example of how this method of scripturally motivated reflection on ecological issues might be made more generally available. As noted several times, quantitative evaluation of the effectiveness of these studies in encouraging ecological discipleship is not practical in the scope of this thesis. However, it is still useful to make some sort of evaluation.

This has been done by evaluating the alignment of the studies with Bock's list of characteristics of effective ecological discipleship programs. It is found that there is excellent alignment with many of these characteristics. In particular, Bock finds that successful programs make a strong link between scripture and ecological praxis, and this is exactly where these creation-care Bible studies can contribute best. The studies can be a useful first step in changing Christian attitudes and understandings of creation care

## 8.2 Significant Original Contributions to Knowledge

The primary contribution of the thesis is the proposal of a new two-stage method for ecological readings of scripture. In the first step, virtues and vices are identified. In the second application step, these virtues and vices are considered in relation to the ecological crisis.

The use of virtues and vices as a contemporary interpretive lens for scripture is, I believe, novel. While others have used virtues and vices as theological motifs that appear across scripture, they have not been used for interpreting individual texts, and certainly not in the context of understanding the current ecological crisis.

A significant advantage of this new method is that it opens up a very broad range of different biblical texts to ecological reflection. It has been shown to be applicable to a parable and to an OT prophetic oracle, but it should be equally applicable to other genres such as poetry, wisdom literature, narratives, and epistles.

The second contribution has been the demonstration that such a method can be incorporated into Bible studies suitable for discipleship small groups. The interpretive method, and the studies based on the method, have been shown to be consistent with best-practice in ecological discipleship. These studies provide a useful vehicle for making this method available outside of the academic community.

This work adds a useful contribution to the more general literature that is currently emerging in Integral Ecology since it is deliberately transdisciplinary in its focus. This work shares Pope Francis' emphasis of Integral Ecology as keeping together issues of poverty, injustice and ecological devastation, and as such it is well aligned with recent theorists and practitioners in this area.

## 8.3 Future Work

There are at least four different directions in which this work could be extended.

First, there is scope for the longer-term evaluation of the effectiveness of the Bible studies in encouraging ecological discipleship. It is difficult to measure impact in terms of changed behaviour quantitatively, but a first step might be to measure changes in attitudes to the ecological crisis by pre- and post-tests of study participants, perhaps using a measurement tool such as the NEP (New Environmental Paradigm) scale.[334]

[334] Riley E Dunlap et al., "New Trends in Measuring Environmental Attitudes: Measuring Endorsement of the New Ecological Paradigm: A Revised NEP Scale," *Journal of Social Issues* 56, no. 3 (2000).

Second, a broader range of texts could be examined. In addition to prophecy and parables, other biblical genres include gospel narratives, historical narratives, wisdom literature, law, poetry, songs, prayers, sermons, epistles, and eschatological visions.

Third, virtues and vices can be used as an interpretive key with a different social issue being the focus of the application step. For example, a key issue in Australian churches at this time, and in the Australian community more widely, is reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. One can easily see how themes of greed, pride, justice, wisdom, courage, as well as faith, hope and love are all relevant to shared discourse in such an area.

Fourthly, ecological discipleship could include additional emphasis on creation-care action. Currently, the Bible studies are largely an intellectual and spiritual exercise of reflection on biblical texts to identify the individual and community drivers of the ecological crisis, to identify and reflect on the reasons for limited actions to address the crisis, and to consider what changes in personal and community priorities would lead to more sustainable lifestyles. One principle of Virtue Ethics is that virtuous character traits are enhanced and encouraged by active practice of the virtues. One becomes more loving by practicing loving actions, so that loving ethical choices become more habitual. A useful enhancement to an ecological discipleship program would be to enhance the studies with some guided actions, perhaps linked to the seven virtues. Examples could be sharing meals among the small group which deliberately make more sustainable food choices, such as more plant-based dishes. This practices temperance. The small group might choose to actively promote creation care activities within their community in a way that takes them out of their comfort zone, practicing courage.

This eco-virtues approach is not the only way of reading scripture ecologically. It does, however, represent a novel and useful method for reflecting on creation care as being integral to what it means to be a Christian disciple.

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# Appendix A:  Example Creation Care Bible Studies.

The following discipleship small group Bible studies are examples of how the eco-virtues readings of scripture might be used to encourage ecological discipleship.

# Creation Care Bible Study 1: God's Good Creation

*Jesus said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.' (Mark 16:15)*

In this series of Bible studies, we will use the concept of virtues as described in scripture to examine humanity's relationship with creation. We begin by looking at some key scriptural passages describing creation.

Any theology of creation needs to include the creation stories in Genesis 1-2. The biblical editors have joined together two ancient stories of creation to tell us about the role of God and of humans in creation, and the two stories don't always agree.

## Read Gen 1:1-26

*1. Summarise what God created on each of the six days in the first creation story. On which days did God say that creation was good? Did creation need humans to be "good"? What does this mean for our role in creation?*

## Read Gen 1: 27-31

In 1:28, God tells humans: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." This is a contentious text since there are many different ways to interpret and misinterpret "subdue it" and "have dominion".

"subdue" translates the Hebrew "*kabash*" which means: "to bring into bondage, make subservient; to subdue, force, violate; to subdue, dominate, tread down"

"have dominion" translates "*radah*" which means "to have dominion, rule, subjugate."

*2. Do you think these terms accurately reflect God's vision for our relationship with creation, or instead do you think they represent the writer's biased understanding of our relationship with creation (there is no right or wrong answer). What words might you use instead?*

*3. How do you think a "dominating" interpretation of this text has influenced the way we have historically treated creation as a reservoir of resources for our use?*

## Read Gen 2:1-4a, the end of the first creation account.

*4. Do you think God has finished creation, or is God still creating? If so, what are some examples of God's continuing creation.*

## Read Gen 2:4b – 9 (start of the second creation story)

*5. How many days does this creation story take? (v.4b)*

*6. What are the two reasons that there were no plants in the garden. (v. 5)? How does God fix this?*

*7. How did God make the human being (v. 7)? In fact the Hebrew uses the words "adam" for man or human and "adamah" for ground, so a richer translation would be "God formed the earthling from the dust of the earth" How does this link us with the rest of creation?*

## Read Gen 2:15.

There are two key Hebrew words here.

"Till" the garden translates "*abad*" which means "to labour, work, do work; to work for another, serve another by labour; to serve as subjects."

"Keep" translates "*shamar*" which means "to keep, have charge of, guard, keep watch and ward, protect, to watch, observe, to keep, retain, treasure up (in memory), preserve, protect."

A better translation might be "God put the human in the garden of Eden to serve it and preserve it."

*8. Do you think this role as servant and preserver applied just to the original garden, or does it also apply to all creation today? How do these roles compare to the roles to subdue and dominate in Genesis 1? Which do you prefer, if any?*

Indigenous Australians often have a very different relationship to their country compared to non-indigenous Australians. Palyku woman Ambelin Kwaymullina explains:

> "For Aboriginal peoples, country is much more than a place. Rock, tree, river, hill, animal, human – all were formed of the same substance by the Ancestors who continue to live in land, water, sky. Country is filled with relations speaking language and following Law, no matter whether the shape of that relation is human, rock, crow, wattle. Country is loved, needed, and cared for, and country loves, needs, and cares for her peoples in turn. Country is family, culture, identity. Country is self." [1]

*9. What echoes of such sentiments do you see in the Genesis stories? How would you describe your personal relationship to the physical country where you live?*

## Closing Prayer

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace with your tenderness all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty. Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one. O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes. Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction. Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light. We thank you for being with us each day. Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace. Amen. [2]

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[11] 'Seeing the Light: Aboriginal Law, Learning and Sustainable Living in Country', Ambelin Kwaymullina, Indigenous Law Bulletin May/June 2005, Volume 6, Issue 11
Translation information from Blue Letter Bible , blbclassic.org
[2]Pope Francis, Papal Encyclical Laudato Si

# Creation Care Bible Study 2: Eco-virtues: Wisdom & Justice

*But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:24)*

For the next few studies, we'll look at the concept of moral virtues, how these are described in the Bible, and how they might be relevant to a right relationship with creation.

The four cardinal virtues or human virtues are wisdom (or prudence), courage (or fortitude), temperance and justice. The Roman Catholic Catechism describes them as follows:

*Human virtues are firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. the virtuous person is one who freely practices the good. The moral virtues are acquired by human effort. They are the fruit and seed of morally good acts; they dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with divine love.*

This study will look at wisdom and justice, the next study at temperance and courage, and then we'll look at the "theological" virtues of faith, hope and love (charity).

**Wisdom**: *Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.*[1]

Here are just a few of the Biblical references to wisdom: Genesis 3:6 (Adam and eat the fruit to get wisdom), Deut 4:5-8 (God's laws give wisdom), 1 Kings 3:28 & 10:23-24 (Solomon's wisdom), Job 28:20-28 (Where does wisdom come from?); Psalm 111:10 (Wisdom comes from the Lord). Proverbs 1:1-7, 3:13-20 (in fact most of the book of Proverbs!), Proverbs 8 talks about Lady Wisdom. Eccl 1:12-18 (Wisdom is Meaningless) Eccl 9:13-18 (Wisdom better than folly) Isaiah 33:5-6 (God is the key to wisdom), Jer 10:11-16 (God made the world through his wisdom) Daniel 1:17-20 (God gives Daniel wisdom). Ecological wisdom appears in Leviticus 24:1-17 (Sabbath and Jubilee for the land). From the Aprocrypha: Wisdom of Solomon 7:21-26.

*1. In Proverbs 8:22-31, what do you think it means to have wisdom personified as Lady Wisdom, who was created before the creation of the Earth? Is this just a literary device, or is it something more significant?*

*2. How do we use books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes now? Do we turn to them for wisdom much?*

From the New Testament: Matt 13:54 (Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue) Luke 2:52 (Jesus grows in wisdom) Luke 21:15 (Jesus gives wisdom in persecution) 1 Cor 1:18-31 (Christ crucified is God's power and wisdom) 1 Cor 2 (God's wisdom revealed by the spirit) Eph 1:15-18 (Spirit of Wisdom)2 Col 2: 2-4 (Christ is wisdom and knowledge) James 3:13-18 (two kinds of wisdom), Rev 5:11-12 (Worthy is the Lamb).

*3. What do you think this new kind of wisdom from the Spirit is? Does it make human wisdom obsolete? To what does this new wisdom refer to? Daily life? Salvation? Science?*

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[1] Catechism of the Catholic Church article 1806 (wisdom) 1807 (justice)

*4. How do you think we, as Christians, are meant to exercise wisdom in our relationship with creation? What is the relationship between scientific predictions of a damaged earth and trust in God to always care and provide?*

**Justice:** *Justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbour. … Justice toward people disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good.*

Some OT texts: Ex 23:1-9 (Laws of justice and mercy). Deut 16:18-20 (Appoint wise judges) 1 Kings 3:7-12 (Solomon asks for wisdom in dispensing justice) 2 Chron 19:4-7 (Judges to be just) Job 34:1-15 (God is just) Ps 33:4-5, Ps 36:5-9 (God's justice) Ps 97:1-4 (God's righteousness and justice) Ps 140:12-14, Prov 29:7-14, Is 9:6-7, Is 30:18 (God longs for justice and mercy), Is 42:1-4 (The just servant) Amos 5:21-24 (Let justice roll on like a river), Zech 7:8-10 (Administer true justice). And in the NT: Matt 12:15-21 (Jesus fulfils Isaiah's prophecy of the just servant) Matt 23:23 (important parts of the law) Luke 18:1-8 (Parable of Persistent Widow) Acts 28:1-6 (Goddess Justice), Rev 19:11-13 (Justice from heaven)

*5. Why do you think justice and righteousness are often linked together in descriptions of God's qualities? What about justice and mercy?*

*6. Why do you think the poor, the widows, the foreigners are particularly mentioned as requiring justice? What does this tell you about God's justice – is it just correct judgement, or something more compassionate?*

*7. What does it mean to talk about ecological justice? How are our current unsustainable lifestyles unjust to the world's poor?*

*8. Is it meaningful to talk about justice for animals, plants, or ecosystems?*

*9. The study of virtues also involves the study of vices, and each virtue has a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency. For example, deficiencies of wisdom include foolishness, ignorance, lack of forethought. What are some other vices associated with too much or too little wisdom or justice? How do these manifest in our relationship with creation?*

***Closing Prayer***

***God of justice, help us to work for a just and peaceful world, where every creature, every ecosystem and every person can live as you intended.***

***God of wisdom, grant us wisdom to work for what is really important for us and for all creatures to flourish in your generous and beautiful creation.***

***Banish the greed and selfishness that turns our vision inward towards ourselves, and instead open our hearts to the joy that comes from serving you by serving others.***

***Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.***

# Creation Care Study 3: Eco-virtues: Temperance & Courage

*Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. (1 Cor 16:13)*

We continue our study of virtues. Last time we looked at wisdom and justice, in this study we will look at temperance and courage, and then in study 7, we'll look at the "theological" virtues of faith, hope and love (or charity).

**Temperance:** *Temperance is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honourable. the temperate person directs the sensitive appetites toward what is good and maintains a healthy discretion.*[2]

Other names for temperance and other associated virtues associated with temperance include moderation, sobriety, humility, meekness, modesty, patience, self-control.

We also mentioned last time that there are vices associated with each virtue. For temperance, vices of deficiency are things like intemperance, greed, gluttony, lust, drunkenness, pride, immodesty. Vices of excess include insensibility (unable to enjoy good things), frugality, miserliness, niggardliness.

Here are a few verses that talk about these virtues and vices – a lot more about the vices!

**Temperance:** 1 Thess 5:4-8 (Be awake and sober); Rom 12:2-3 (Do not conform to the world), Psalm 18:25-27 (Be humble), Psalm 147:5-6 (Be humble), Prov 11:2 (Humility), Isaiah 66:1-2 (Be humble & contrite), Zeph 2:39 (Seek humility), Matt 11:18-19 (Jesus & John the Baptist), Matt 11:28-30 (Jesus is humble in heart), Eph 4:1-3 (Be humble), James 3:13 (Humility), James 4:4-10 (Resist pleasures of the world), Col 3:12-13 (Humility, patience), Joel 1:5-7 (Wake up drunkards), Romans 13:11-14 (Wake up), Gal 5:19-25 (Flesh versus fruits of the spirit), Exodus 20:17 (Do not covet), Prov 16:18 (Pride), Is 2:6-12 (Greed), 1 John 2:15-17 (Do not love the world), Matt 5:5 (Meek), 1 Cor 6:18-20 (Body is a temple), Ps 107:8-9 (Satisfies the hungry), Deut 11:8-15 (Riches of the promised land), Ps 23 (Cup overflows)

*1. There were many arguments in the early church about whether Christians should live in poverty, eating and drinking and even sleeping very little, or living abundant lives. What do you think is an appropriate level of enjoyment of life's pleasures?*

*2. Developed nations in particular are using Earth's resources unsustainably. Why do you think we are so greedy? Is such resource use a sin?*

*3. How do you think our human pride affects our relationship with creation? What does it mean to be humble in our relationship with creation?*

*4. The world economy is based on continual growth – if we use less and so spend less then we are in a recession. Does continually increasing consumption on a finite planet make sense?*

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[2] Catechism of the Catholic Church article 1808 (fortitude) 1809 (temperance)

*5. Many young people are less interested in a consumer lifestyle. Can we change the current economic model? How?*

**Courage**: *Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. the virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions. It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice one's life in defence of a just cause.*

Texts: Deut 31:6-8 (Be strong & courageous); Joshua 1:6-9 (Be strong & courageous), 1 Chron 28:20 (Solomon to be courageous), Matt 14:25-31 (Walks on water – take courage); Acts 4:8-13 (Peter & John's courage) , 1 Cor 16:13 (Be courageous), Exodus 14:12-16 (Stand firm), Matt 10:16-23 (Sheep among wolves) , Eph 6:10-17 (Armour of God) , Rev 21:6-8, 1 Sam 17:32-37 (David & Goliath), Gen 3:10 (Adam afraid), Ps 27:1-5 (I will not fear). Ps 118:5-7 (I will not fear), Is 12:2 (Be not afraid) , Romans 8:37-39 (More than conquerors).

*6. What are some of the vices of deficiency of courage (i.e., not enough courage)?*

*7 What are some of vices of excess of courage (too much courage)?*

**The Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.** Ps 147:11. The Hebrew word ***yare*** here means fearing, reverent, afraid.

*8. What do think fear of God means? How do you think fear and courage are related? Are they opposites?*

*9. What do you think courage means in terms of our relationship with creation? What does courage mean in terms of promoting an individually more sustainable lifestyle or advocating for a more sustainable society. How can we be more courageous?*

*10. Which virtues (wisdom, justice, temperance, courage) do you think are missing in our society/government/church related to sustainability?*

**Closing Prayer.**

*O Lord, grant us the grace to grow deeper in our respect of and care for your Creation.*

**Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

*O Lord, help us to recognize the magnificence of all of your creatures as signs of your wondrous love.*

**Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

*O Lord, help us turn from the selfish consumption of resources meant for all and to see the impacts of our choices on the poor and vulnerable.*

**Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.**

# Creation Care Bible Study 4: Eco-virtues: Faith, Hope & Love

*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:8)*

This study looks at the final 3 virtues, called the theological or Christian virtues, which are in addition to the four cardinal virtues originally proposed by Aristotle. They are seen as gifts of God, rather than moral attributes that we can cultivate by ourselves.

Read 1 Cor 13:1-13. Next are extracts from the Catholic Catechism.

*The **theological virtues** are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character. They inform and give life to all the moral virtues. They are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life. They are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being. There are three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity (love).*

**Faith** *is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us.*

**Hope** *is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.*

**Charity (love)** *is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake and our neighbour as ourselves for the love of God. … The fruits of charity are joy, peace, and mercy; … Love is itself the fulfilment of all our works.* [1]

*1. How do you think these virtues give a special character to Christian moral activity compared to a more secular ethical approach?*

These virtues also differ from the cardinal virtues in terms of the associated vices. There are vices of deficiency, i.e., not enough faith, hope or love. What about vices of excess?

*2. Can you have too much faith in God, hope in God, love for God and neighbour?*

There are vices associated with these virtues when the objects of our faith, hope and love are misplaced. We can look at some examples of misplaced faith.

At the time of the prophet Amos, the Israelites believed that if they observed all the temple rules and religious festivals, they would be safe under God's protection, even at the same time as oppressing the poor and acting dishonestly. Read Amos 5:21-27 (or the whole chapter) – if you have it, read The Message paraphrase. The people have (misplaced) faith and hope in their own salvation, but not love.

*3. How does this rebuke remind you of the church today and its priorities in a time of ecological crisis? Are our hope and our faith in our own cleverness misplaced? Do we have too much faith and hope in our rituals and structures and catechisms? Do we love the right things?*

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[1] Catechism of the Catholic Church articles 1812-1829

Read Matt 6:25-34 (Do not worry … ). In this passage, Jesus equates worry about the future with a lack of faith.

*4. Do you think this passage means that we don't need to worry about the potential for damage happening to the environment? Can we just trust that tomorrow will take care of itself?*

*5. In the face of the current ecological crisis, what does it mean to have faith in God and sure hope in God's protection?*

From an article on eco-anxiety[2]

> Climate change harms mental wellbeing in a number of ways. From trauma and stress following disasters to relationship damage caused by separation and displacement, the psychological effects of climate change can be enduring. Of course, these effects are heightened for certain vulnerable populations, such as elderly and low-income people, as well as those on the frontlines of climate change.
>
> But even people whose lives and livelihoods don't depend directly on the climate can feel the psychological strain. As noted in a report by psychology professor Susan Clayton at the College of Wooster and colleagues, "the ability to process information and make decisions without being disabled by extreme emotional responses is threatened by climate change".

*6. How can Christian faith, hope and love aid us in dealing with the consequences of the ecological crisis.*

Read Luke 10:25-36 (Parable of the Good Samaritan). Read 1 Cor 13:4-7 again.

*7. Should we think of other creatures or even all creation as our neighbours? What does it mean to love God's creation as our neighbour?*

**Closing Prayer**

*God of faithfulness, give us faith to trust in your care of our broken planet.*

*God of hope, wipe away our tears and our frustrations and help us make you our hope and our comfort.*

*God of love, fill us with your love so that it overflows to all those around us, to every creature, and to every place that you have so lovingly created.*

*Amen.*

[2] https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20191010-how-to-beat-anxiety-about-climate-change-and-eco-awareness

# Creation Care Bible Study 5: Eco-virtues– Prodigal Son

*The difference between mercy and grace? Mercy gave the prodigal son a second chance. Grace gave him a feast – Max Lucado.*

In the past three studies we looked at the ideas of cardinal and theological virtues which can act as ethical guideposts for making decisions about what to do and how to live in Jesus' new kingdom. Here's a Summary:

| **Cardinal Virtue**<br>**Related Virtues** | **Vice of Deficiency** | **Vice of Excess** |
|---|---|---|
| **Wisdom**<br>*Creativity*<br>*Open-mindedness* | *Foolishness*<br>*Conformity*<br>*Gullibility* | *Eccentricity*<br>*Cynicism*<br>*Nosiness* |
| **Courage**<br>*Persistence*<br>*Honesty* | *Cowardice*<br>*Helplessness*<br>*Deceit* | *Foolhardiness*<br>*Obsessiveness*<br>*Self-righteousness* |
| **Justice**<br>*Fairness*<br>*Teamwork* | *Selfishness*<br>*Prejudice*<br>*Sabotage* | *Despotism*<br>*Detachment* |
| **Temperance**<br>*Humility*<br>*Modesty* | *Greed*<br>*Pride*<br>*Self-Indulgence* | *Prudishness*<br>*Self-denial* |
| **Theological Virtue** | **Vice of Deficiency** | **Vice of Misplaced Target** |
| **Faith in God** | *Despair*<br>*Insecurity* | *Fate, Logic, Reason*<br>*Human Goodness*<br>*Science & Technology* |
| **Hope in God** | *Hopelessness* | *Science & Technology*<br>*Nature, Military Power* |
| **Love for God and Neighbour** | *Self-centredness*<br>*Disinterest*<br>*Narcissism* | *Wealth, Power*<br>*Progress, Our tribe* |

We also looked at how thinking about these virtues might allow us to make better decisions about our relationship with the rest of creation.

This study looks at a familiar Bible story – Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son (or Loving Father or …). We will especially look for what virtues and vices are described in the story, and reflect on how these are reflected in our relationship with creation, and also our relationship with all our global neighbours.

The context is in Luke 15:1-2, and then the parable in Luke 15:11-32.

In the following interpretation, it is not necessary to find a one-to-one match between the characters in the parable and characters like God, Pharisees, Sinners. Instead, imagine what we can learn by looking at how we ourselves are reflected in each of the characters. Think particularly about how these virtues and vices appear are relevant to creation care.

*Q1. In Luke 15:11-12, What virtue/vices are displayed by the younger son? How are these reflected in society's relationship with creation? What about the father's actions – any virtues or vices? How might we act similarly in relation to others and to creation?*

*Q2: The son goes away (v. 13) – what vices/virtues does he display (bravery? cowardice?) and how is this reflected today in our relationship with creation?*

*Q3. The son loses everything (vv. 14-16) – what vices/virtues are displayed by the son? What about those around him both when he is extravagant and when he is destitute? How are these same virtues and vices reflected today?*

*Q4. The son comes to his senses (vv. 17-19) and decides to return home? What virtues does he now show? Are these reflected in society today?*

*Q5. The son returns and the father runs to greet him (. v20). What virtues and vices are displayed by the father? By the prodigal son? How do we see these today?*

*Q6. The son repents (v. 21) Vices/Virtues? Today?*

*Q7. The father reinstates the son (vv. 22-24) Vices/Virtues? Today?*

*Q8. The older son hears about the prodigal's return and gets angry (vv. 25-28) Vices/Virtues? Today? What does the father beg him to do?*

*Q9. What is the older son's complaint (vv. 29-30)? Vices/Virtues? Today?*

*Q10. The father explains his actions and assures his love for both sons (vv. 31-32) Vices/Virtues? Today?*

The meaning for the original hearers of the parable was twofold – those "sinners" who come to Jesus are loved, and secondly that all, including the Pharisees, should be glad.

*Q11. What are the overall messages that you hear from this parable about humanity's relationship to creation? About your personal relationship to creation?*

**Closing Psalm**

*God of the great and the small, we praise and adore you.*

*You are hidden in the flowers, invisible in the leaves,*

*You roar with lions, swim with dolphins,*

*You fly with eagles and crawl with caterpillars.*

*You have created everything and everything is yours.*

*Help us find you wherever we look.*

*God of the great and the small, we praise and adore you.*

# Creation Care Bible Study 6: Eco-virtues – Obadiah

*Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down," declares the Lord. (Obadiah 1:3)*

**VIRTUES: Wisdom Courage Justice Temperance Faith Hope Love**

This study uses our interpretive technique of looking for virtues and vices in a story. We are asked to see how this fits with our situation, particularly our relationship with creation. We look at the shortest book in Old Testament – Obadiah. Like the prodigal son story, it is based on a dispute between brothers (in fact between their descendants centuries later).

**Background**

The context of the book depends on the long and complicated history between Judah and Edom. Edom was the land directly south-east of Judah, and trade routes between Judah and Egypt passed through Edom. Traditionally, the Edomites were the descendants of Esau, the disenfranchised brother of Jacob (also known as Israel). Edom also refers to the nation who live in that country, and the name "Esau" is also used to refer to the people of Edom.

The region of Edom was mountainous, and its capital was the modern tourist destination of Petra – a city protected with its entrance via a narrow chasm. Initially, the relationship between Edom/Esau and Israel/Jacob was friendly. After Esau lost his birthright to Jacob's deceptions, he left but later returned and offered forgiveness to Jacob. Their meeting was tense but seemingly friendly. Esau returned to the Seir (another name for Edom based on the Seir mountains on the east of Edom). Both brothers buried their father, suggesting they were on reasonable terms. After the exodus from Egypt, rules about who may be included in the assembly of the Lord mention Edomites: "Do not despise an Edomite, for the Edomites are related to you. … The third generation of children born to them may enter the assembly of the Lord." However, relations became more strained over the centuries. Edom is listed as one of the enemies who Saul fought against. King David conquered Edom but they later revolted under Jehoram's rule. The next 150 years saw conflicts between Edom and Judah over trade routes to the south, with Edom growing in strength, expanding further west and controlling more of the key trade routes.

In the prophetic literature, Edom is condemned more than any other nation, even more than Assyria and Babylon who conquered the northern and southern kingdoms. The hostilities between Judah and Edom reached a head at the time of the invasion of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar around 586 BCE. Based on the various prophetical and historical proclamations against Edom, the following can be assumed as Judah's versions of events. Jerusalem was besieged and attacked by the Babylonians. The Edomites did not come to Judah's assistance, but stood back and watched Jerusalem's destruction, and then looted a defeated Jerusalem. Refugees escaping south from Jerusalem needed to pass through Edom, and the Edomites captured these refugees and sold them into slavery. Once Jerusalem had been sacked, Edom took the opportunity to expand their lands into former parts of Judah. Since Edom was supposed to act like a brother to Judah, and had made a treaty with Judah, this betrayal was doubly offensive, and hence the many oracles above calling for the destruction of Edom.

In terms of literary structure, Obadiah consists of a single prophetic oracle, with a structure similar to many other prophetic oracles. The oracle starts in v1 with a superscription naming the author, Obadiah, followed by a message formula describing the source of the message (Lord God), the topic of the message (Edom) and the recipient of the message ("we have heard" and a "messenger sent to the nations"). This is followed by the prophetic message of judgement and restoration, which consists of the remainder of the book (vv 2-21). The prophetic message can be further broken down into an extended oracle of judgement and reversal directed, in the second person, at Edom. (vv 2-16). This is followed by an oracle of retribution by Judah on Edom (vv 17-18) and restoration for Judah (vv 19-21).

Much of the book is an oracle against the Edomites and their betrayal of Judah, written in the second person directly addressed to Edom, and yet the audience for the reading of the book is more likely to be the Judahites either in exile, or the remnant still living in Judah. The likely purpose of the book is a lament for Judah, a curse on Edom for their treatment of Judah, and a promise for the restoration of all of the nation of Israel. The book moves from God's predicted judgement on Edom, to the nations including Judah being the deliverer of that judgement, and then to a unified Israel's restoration. The book is reassurance that the people of Judah have not been abandoned by God, but rather they will be restored as both God's people and the rightful inheritors of the whole land of Israel.

**Eco-Virtues Reading**

*Q1. Obadiah 1:1-4: What vices are exhibited in Edom's behaviour and in its attitude? How are these reflected today in our culture? What virtues are shown in God's response?*

*Q2. What is the repayment for Edom? (vv. 5-8) How does it fit the crime? What today is the likely result of the greed and the unsustainability of our lifestyle?*

*Q3. What did Edom do when Jerusalem was attacked? (vv. 10-12) How are these same vices exhibited today?*

*Q4. Edom didn't just stand aside, what did it do to the plundered Jerusalem? Are there parallels today?*

*Q5. Vv. 15-16: What is the likely result of our current lifestyles? Does society accept wise scientific advice?*

*Q6: vv. 17-20: Concentrating here on the restoration of Israel, what messages of faith and hope do we have from a loving God? Whose Kingdom will be restored (v. 21)? Is God's plan destruction or restoration?*

**Closing Psalm**

*God, you are my God, how great and beautiful you are.*
*You clothe yourself in sunshine and moonlight,*
*You live beneath the clear blue heavens,*
*The oceans are your palace,*
*You walk through the rainforests in the cool of the day,*
*The deserts are your resting place.*

*God, you are my God, how great and beautiful you are.*

# Creation Care Bible Study 7: What Next?

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time (Rom 8:22)*

**Whose Creation?**

**Psalm 24:1** The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.

**Gen 2:15** The Lord God took the human and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

*Q1. Having looked at different biblical perspectives on humanity's relationship with creation, what words would you use to describe our role: Owner, steward, tenant, vice-regent, caretaker, protector, servant, guardian, voice, prophet, pilgrim, partner?*

*Q2. What words would you use to describe creation: Garden, gift, loan, stage, storehouse, temporary, home, responsibility, inheritance, praise?*

**Humanity's Report Card**

**Luke 12:54-57**: Jesus said to the crowd: 'When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, "It's going to rain," and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, "It's going to be hot," and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? 'Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?

*Q3. In terms of creation care, what is humanity doing well (or at least doing better)? What is doing poorly? What is getting worse?*

*Q4. In terms of creation care, is the Christian church doing better or worse than the rest of humanity? Why do you think that is? What could we do better?*

**Our Responses**

**Deut 11:11-12** But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end.

**Rom 8:18-23**: I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

*Q5. Is creation care something that the wider church should take an active role in? Or is it a distraction from the Church's mission to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19)?*

*Q6. Are there particular actions that we might take as individuals, or as a church community, to care for creation and to celebrate creation in our local area? In our homes? In our local community? In our congregation?*

*Q7. What about celebrating creation and caring for creation in worship services, prayers, yearly celebrations, music, community service?*

*Q8. What might your church organisation do as a national body? Policies? Actions? Resources? Education?*

*Q9. Any final thoughts or feedback?*

**Closing Psalm**

*Praise the Lord.*
*Praise God in high heaven, Praise God here on earth.*
*Praise God for who God is and for what God does.*
*Praise God with orchestra and band,*
*Praise God with singing and dancing,*
*Praise God with peace and quiet,*
*Praise God with hoof and wing, roar and whisper.*

*Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.*