Revisiting the 'Voice of Earth'

Earth Bible Principle #3.

Vicky Balabanski

Uniting College for Leadership & Theology Yarthu Apinthi Kaurna Country
University of Divinity
vbalabanski@unitingcollege.edu.au

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25784/jeac.v5i1.1204

The Earth Bible project framed its endeavour to formulate a fresh approach to reading the Bible *with* Earth around six eco-justice principles.[1] The third of these principles was one that proved particularly controversial:

> 3. The Principle of Voice
>
> Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.

The controversy engendered by this principle was anticipated in the Earth Bible Volume 1, discussed in dialogue with Gene Tucker in Volume 2, and given particular attention in response to a critique by Tim Meadowcroft in Volume 4.[2] The controversies revolve around several issues. This principle is certainly metaphorical, but to what extent does it claim to be more than a metaphor? Is this principle imposing human categories on a greater-than-human entity, and thus embedding a profoundly anthropocentric stance into its approach? Is this voice a human creation, or if not, what modes of self-expression and communication are envisaged? Can humans mediate–or indeed suppress–the voice of Earth? To these we can add: how can a collectivist entity, the Earth community, be said to have volition–to celebrate or to protest against injustice? Is this another way of formulating the notion that earthquakes, floods, droughts and natural disasters reflect a will (God's or Nature's), rather than a consequence of human mismanagement and greed, or simply physics?

The present contribution seeks to revisit this eco-justice principle, re-examining its epistemological foundation, its heuristic function, and what may have changed in our perception of this principle in the intervening years. Does the principle of Voice still have a useful role to play in shaping our readerly posture in relation to biblical interpretation?

[1] The six Principles can be seen here Earth Bible EcoJustice Principles (https://www.webofcreation.org/Earthbible/ebprinciples.html). Earth is capitalized in the project, and refers to the community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival (see Principle #2). See HABEL, NORMAN C., ed. *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*. The Earth Bible 1. Sheffield: Academic Press, 2000, 24–37.

[2] See ibid. 46–48; HABEL, NORMAN C., ed. *The Earth Story in Genesis*. The Earth Bible 2. Sheffield: Academic Press, 2000, 29–30; HABEL, NORMAN C., ed. *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*. The Earth Bible 4. Sheffield: Academic Press, 23–28.

1. The Epistemological role of the Principle of Voice

Core to the Earth Bible approach is the endeavour to perceive Earth as subject rather than object.[3] This involves shifting the relational posture of the biblical interpreter away from an I-It relationship with Earth towards a relationship that more closely resembles an I-Thou relationship. The foundation of this epistemological approach goes back to Martin Buber's classic work *Ich und Du,* published in 1923, which has had a lasting influence not only in the fields of religion and spirituality, but also in such fields as psychology, educational philosophy, ethics, intercultural studies and communication. The influence of Buber's work has entered the Earth Bible approach via the writings of Paul Santmire, who began addressing ecological issues in his Harvard doctoral dissertation on Karl Barth (1966) and in his first book, *Brother Earth: Nature, God, and Ecology in a Time of Crisis* (1970). Through his friendship with Norman Habel and through *The Travail of Nature: the Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (1985), Santmire has influenced the Earth Bible approach. Santmire's most recent book *Behold the Lilies: Jesus and the Contemplation of Nature–A Primer* (2017) reopens the question of whether we can have an I-Thou relationship with nature. In a revised version of a chapter in this book (2018), Santmire argues for adding a third type of relationship–an I-*Ens* relationship to Buber's theory.[4] Santmire states:

> "If when you behold the lilies, then, your relationship is not an I-It relationship, what is it? Is it an I-Thou relationship? Not according to Buber. The reason? Reciprocal speech is of the essence of an I-Thou relationship, as Buber understands it."[5]

In *I and Thou,* Buber had discussed humans' relations with a tree.[6] Though there are at least five types of relations, all of them fall into the category of an I-It relationship. Nevertheless, in a postscript to the last edition of *I and Thou* published in his lifetime, Buber expressed his opinion that a certain kind of reciprocity between a human and a tree is indeed possible, and that with animals, we are at "the threshold of mutuality."[7] Santmire takes up this insight, and introduces the additional category of '*Ens*' ('*Ens*' is the Latin for 'being'), referring to a 'Thou without Speech'. An '*Ens*' is characterized both by its "givenness"–a beauty beyond utilitarian considerations–and by what Santmire calls "mysterious activity".[8] For Santmire, the I-*Ens* relationship is most closely akin to wonder, expressed by the qualities of "total attention, openness, as well as the willingness in the 'I' to become small and lowly."[9] He goes on to argue that other moods are evoked in this relational encounter in addition to wonder: repulsion, delight and a sense of the presence of God.[10]

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[3] HABEL, *The Earth Story in the Psalms*, 24.
[4] SANTMIRE, H. PAUL. "Behold the Lilies: Martin Buber and the Contemplation of Nature1." *Dialog* 57 (2018): 18–22.
[5] SANTMIRE, "Behold the Lilies," 20.
[6] BUBER, MARTIN. *I and Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York : Touchstone, 1996, 47–58.
[7] Cited by SANTMIRE, "Behold the Lilies," 20.
[8] Ibid. A brilliant example is to be found in the film 'My Octopus Teacher' (2020).
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 20–21.

The Earth Bible principle of Voice both resonates with and differs from Santmire's concept of an I-*Ens* relationship. The principle insists that Earth is not a *Thou without speech*, but that the *mysterious activity* to which Santmire refers is indeed a type of speech, expression or communication, though not of course human speech. In seeking to approach Earth as subject, the Earth Bible team does indeed seek to adopt a posture of attention, openness and humility towards the neglected Other, the Earth community of which we are a part, on which we are dependent, and which we do not ultimately control. We seek to bring this posture to the reading and interpretation of Scripture, noticing more clearly than we otherwise would the evocation of Earth in Scripture and the way in which its active presence does indeed correlate with wonder and delight, or at times repulsion; certainly the presence of God is made more immediate through Earth.

As regards *total attention, openness, as well as the willingness to become small and lowly*, we also recognise that there are human beings–Indigenous peoples, prophets and poets, as well as researchers who spend much time with other-than-human species–who can hear and interpret the sound and communication of species other than our own. This has sometimes been called the *Lorax complex*.[11]

Indeed people of faith in a God who speaks, yet whose speech is not like our own speech, necessarily seek to ascertain what is God's speech and distinguish it from what is chance and random. Ps 19:1–4 (LXX 18:2–5) affirms that "the heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, their voice is not heard, yet their *voice* goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world."[12]

There is paradox here. These verses affirm that the natural world is communicating–indeed pouring forth speech and knowledge about the Creator. Looking carefully at the LXX and the Hebrew, these verses state that there are no languages, nor words and their voices are not heard; the communication is of a different order. It is the tone or sound as of a musical instrument (ὁ φθόγγος) that goes out according to the LXX. This corresponds to the Hebrew קָו (qav): a cord, measuring line or string, which has led the translators of the KJV and more recently the NASB to translate this as their "*line* is gone out through all the earth" (Ps 19:4). Yet this string or cord may be a musical chord rather than a measuring line, cord or boundary marker.[13] Whether or not this is the case, this verse states that there is a sound, a reverberation, of the glory of God that is communicated by the natural world to all who give close attention to perceiving it.[14]

[11] KOPNINA, HELEN. "The Lorax complex: deep ecology, ecocentrism and exclusion." *Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences* 9 (2012): 235–54.
[12] See my discussion of these verses in relation to the Pauline Epistles: BALABANSKI, VICKY S. "Pauline Epistles." Pages 240–55 in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Ecology*. Edited by HILARY MARLOW and MARK HARRIS. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, 246–47.
[13] So GESENIUS, WILHELM *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated by E. Robinson, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, 876.
[14] For a reading that takes the term as referring to a plumb-line or canon and thus to the laws and language of Nature, see WEISER, ARTUR. *The Psalms: A commentary*. The Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962, 199.

Perhaps music is the closest analogy to the voice of Earth. It will be argued below that it is legitimate to call this sound *voice*, while acknowledging that what is meant is not a human voice, nor a straightforward concept of communication.

There has long been a weakness in our Western theories of knowledge in relation to the Other, whether it be the female Other, the colonized Other or the more-than-human Other.[15] While feminism and post colonialism have helped reveal key aspects of this weakness, the scholarly world continues to need prompting to consider how the more-than-human Other communicates knowledge. Earth Bible Principle #3 is just such a prompt to attend carefully and with humility to the voice of Earth as it is refracted and reverberates in Scripture.

2. The Heuristic function of the Principle of Voice

In the intervening quarter of a century since the formulation of the Earth Bible principles, there has been reflection on the function and usefulness of the principles in shaping an approach to reading the Bible in solidarity with Earth. A significant dialogue partner has been Ernst M. Conradie, whose review article in 2004 introduced the Earth Bible to a wider audience.[16] He rightly pointed out that 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 in the Biblical texts."[17] He raised the question as to whether the project is leading to new methodological–and thus hermeneutical–insights, or whether it will simply be a different way of reading the Bible, and concedes that in 2004 it was still too early to make this call.

I affirm Conradie's suggestion that the principles seek to pose new questions. In doing so they are best understood as heuristic rather than directly hermeneutical. They do not in themselves prescribe an interpretive method, nor dictate how one is to make meaning of the ancient text. Instead, they help shape what I have been calling a readerly posture, characterized by the *total attention, openness, as well as the willingness to become small and lowly*" in relation to Earth. Just as it takes deep formation to practise this posture in relation to the divine, so too does it take effort and practice to cultivate this openness to the Earth in Scripture, noticing its depiction or absence, and at times to critique these things.

The Earth Bible principles do reflect an ideological position, in which the Earth is an interconnected community of intrinsic worth and indeed an active Subject, not simply an object or *topos* for disinterested study. They see the interpreter as partnering with Earth to sustain its balance and diversity. They also see the Earth set against the backdrop of a dynamic cosmic design; although the Creator is not explicitly mentioned, the fourth principle[18] can mean

[15] To this list we could add the child. For the Romantics, childhood was epistemologically significant. See ROSZAK, THEODORE. *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology*. 2nd ed. An Alexandria Book. Grand Rapids: Phanes Press., 2001, 296–301.
[16] CONRADIE, ERNST M. "Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project." *Scriptura* 85 (2012), 123–35.
[17] Ibid., 128.
[18] See https://www.webofcreation.org/Earthbible/ebprinciples.html.: "4. The Principle of Purpose: The universe, Earth and all its components are a part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall of that design."

nothing other than an affirmation of the reality of the Creator whose universe has an overarching goal.

The principles are primarily heuristic, not confessional. The Earth Bible team did not require writers to *hold* all or any of the *principles*, but asked them to *use* them to open the text in ways that moved them away from studying Earth as an object, and towards reading in solidarity with Earth as subject. They were, and are, a means for inviting heuristic engagement, introducing explicit contemporary and provocative conversation starters derived from secular discourse.

The six principles take a stand against what those who reflect on the aetiology of climate change consider to be a primary ideological threat, namely that of anthropocentrism. The Bible is no longer to be viewed as the story of God and humanity only, but as a three way story of in which Earth is also intrinsically valued by God.

A more recent evaluation of the Earth Bible approach against the backdrop of the rise of ecological hermeneutics is to be found in David Horrell's article in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Ecology*.[19] Horrell directed a collaborative project based at the University of Exeter (2006–2009), which explicitly located itself within the Christian theological tradition and aimed to play a part in the "ecological reformation" of Christianity.[20] Horrell gives an even-handed and insightful overview of the Earth Bible Project, bringing the diversity of the project to the foreground. With regard to the voice of Earth, he states:

> "Also prominent among the contributions to the Earth Bible publications is the concern to retrieve the voice of Earth, though this too is practiced (sic) in various ways. Indeed, this focus of Earth as active character, rather than merely as topic, or setting, is at the heart of the project's concerns. Some find this voice of Earth expressed in particular texts (e.g.Wurst 2001; Marlow 2008), while others engage in the creative construction of a voice of Earth which is nowhere voiced in the text, but arises from a creative and often contrary imagination–for instance, imagining the cries of Earth against the injustice perpetrated again it, by humans or by God (e.g. Swenson 2008: 38, Trudinger 2008: 52, Habel 2011:44–45; Trainor 2012:8,95,117, etc)."[21]

It is indeed a feature of Earth Bible readings that they imaginatively seek to retrieve the voice of Earth. The examples Horrell cites are all examples of this endeavour. All the scholars who embark on listening attentively and constructively to the voice of Earth do so in some sense poetically. They are fully trained biblical exegetes, but not necessarily fully developed poets. Some attempts are successful, and others less so.

One scholar associated with the Earth Bible project who is not only a well-published biblical scholar and literary theorist, but an acclaimed poet as well, is Anne Elvey. In her two most recent monographs, she reflects on and demonstrates her participation in the voice of Earth.

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[19] HORRELL, DAVID G. "Ecological Hermeneutics." Pages 18–34 in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Ecology*. Edited by HILARY MARLOW and MARK HARRIS. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

[20] Ibid., 26, citing NASH, JAMES A. "Toward the Ecological Reformation of Christianity." *Interpretation* 50 (1996), 5–15.

[21] HORRELL, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 25. The references refer to the Swenson and Trudinger articles in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, eds. NORMAN C. HABEL & PETER TRUDINGER. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2008, 31–39 and 41–52. See also HABEL, NORMAN C. *The Birth, the Curse and the Greening of Earth: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1–11*. The Earth Bible Commentary Series 1. Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2011 and TRAINOR, MICHAEL F. *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke*. The Earth Bible Commentary Series 2. Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2012.

In *Reading the Magnificat in Australia: Unsettling Engagements*, Elvey situates the Song of Mary in deep time and a more-than-human context and reflects deeply on the song of birds.[22] Presenting an artful and compelling essay comprised of poetry, history and scientific endeavour, she gives a study of biblical birds, culminating in the divine imaged as bird. She then introduces the field of biosemiotics, a field which emerged some thirty years ago, as "an elaboration, by biologists, psychologists, anthropologists, philosophers, semioticians and, more recently, the odd cultural and literary critic, of the observation that all life–from the cell all the way up to us–is characterized by communication, or semiosis."[23] It is not possible within the scope of this paper to do justice to the nuances of Elvey's contribution, nor to the field of biosemiotics. Instead, I simply wish to suggest that the Earth Bible principles and the endeavour they represent should be interpreted against the wider scholarly emergence of biosemiotics and the related "ethological poetics".[24] All life is characterized by semiosis, by communication. If that idea has proven fruitful in diverse fields, it has also proven significant in developing critical and self-reflective engagement with Scripture. The Principle of Voice has a place in the expanding field of biosemiotics.

In *Reading with Earth: Contributions of the New Materialism to an Ecological Feminist Hermeneutics*, Elvey explores the principle of Earth Voice, giving attention to *Breath*, materiality and the senses.[25] Among the rich insights regarding voice in section one, Elvey states:

> "The assertion of the principle of voice, by the Earth Bible Team, echoes Berry's claim that the spirituality he attributes to Earth is not about human spirituality extended; rather it is about something Earthy/Earthly in which humans might participate, which they cannot own but to which they might attend as to a cry … Moreover, no human articulation of an Earth voice will be complete; many are needed, individually and in concert."[26]

The endeavour to attend to the voice of Earth celebrating or crying out against injustice cannot be simply an extension of our own ego, nor remain an individual voice. It must move towards the collective, motivated by a profound connection with a particular place.[27] Only then can this voice transcend self-interest. This suggests that suspicion is not just useful as a first step in an eco-justice reading of Scripture; it must also be reapplied to our ecological identifi-

[22] ELVEY, ANNE F. *Reading the Magnificat in Australia: Unsettling engagements*. Bible in the Modern World 75. Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2020, 135–73.
[23] WHEELER, WENDY. "The Biosemiotic Turn: Abduction, or, the Nature of Creative Reason in Nature and Culture." Pages 270–82 in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*. Edited by AXEL GOODBODY and KATE RIGBY. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press., 2011, 270, cited by ELVEY, *Reading the Magnificat,* 158. I note that Elvey distances herself from the hierarchical language of the quotation.
[24] COOKE, STUART. "Toward an Ethological Poetics: The Transgression of Genre and the Poetry of the Albert's Lyrebird," *Environmental Humanities* 11 (2019): 302–23.
[25] ELVEY, ANNE F. *Reading with Earth: Contributions of the New Materialism to an Ecological Feminist Hermeneutics*. T&T Clark Explorations in Theology, Gender and Ecology Ser. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022, 25–62.
[26] Ibid., 53, citing BERRY, THOMAS. *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, 70.
[27] An example of an individual moved to speak up for Earth by shock at the mass fish kill in the Darling River in 2019 and again in 2023 is Kate McBride, a young farmer who grew up on a station on the Darling River in NSW. See https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-04-24/call-of-the-river-updated-kate-mcbride/102261932.

cations and retrievals.[28] Only so will it be a heuristic tool that opens up new and plausible insights enabling us to read *with* Earth.

To conclude this section, I will note some other significant developments that have taken place in the intervening years since the formulation of the Earth Bible principles that may have a bearing on how we reflect on the Principle of Voice.

The first is the rise of the concept of the Anthropocene, which from a chance coining of the term in 2000 has risen to claim substantial currency in many academic fields, including the field of geology.[29] The concept of the Anthropocene gives a framework to articulate how a humans have since the mid 20th century been profoundly reshaping Earth's systems, changing Earth's climate, land, oceans and biosphere. This profound and rapid change to Earth's systems has a direct bearing on whether the Earth has a voice. Scientist Jake Robinson has recently been demonstrating that healthy soil emits a subtle symphony of sound, whereas degraded habitats emit a quieter, less diverse soundscape.[30]

A second significant development that contributes to our interpretation of Earth's voice is the publication of the encyclical *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis.[31] In paragraph 85, Pope Francis quotes various sources that speak of Earth having a voice:

> "To sense each creature singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God's love and hope".[32] This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since "for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice".[33] We can say that "alongside revelation properly so-called, contained in sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night".[34] Paying attention to this manifestation, we learn to see ourselves in relation to all other creatures: "I express myself in expressing the world; in my effort to decipher the sacredness of the world, I explore my own".[35]

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of this encyclical in commending the attitude required to hear the voice of Earth: total attention, contemplation, openness, as well as the *willingness to become small and lowly*.

Alongside the developments in Christian circles, there are several others I wish to mention. One is in the field of legal recognition of the rights of natural phenomena such as rivers. An example is in Aotearoa (New Zealand), where the Whanganui River was given a legal voice. Two guardians–one appointed by the iwi (the local Maori people) and the other by the Crown–

[28] ELVEY, *Reading with Earth*, 31.
[29] See NICOLA DAVISON'S article 'The Anthropocene epoch: have we entered a new phase of planetary history?' in The Guardian, 30 May 2019, accessed 25/04/2023, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/30/anthropocene-epoch-have-we-entered-a-new-phase-of-planetary-history
[30] WETZEL, CORRYN. 9 February 2023. 'Soil produces subtle noises that could reveal how healthy a forest is', in *New Scientist*. https://www.newscientist.com/article/2358393-soil-produces-subtle-noises-that-could-reveal-how-healthy-a-forest-is/
[31] See https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
[32] Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan, Reverence for Life. A Message for the Twenty-First Century (1 January 2000), 89.
[33] JOHN PAUL II, "Catechesis (26 January 2000)", 5: *Insegnamenti* 23/1 (2000), 123.
[34] JOHN PAUL II, "Catechesis (2 August 2000)", 3: *Insegnamenti* 23/2 (2000), 112. These page numbers may be back to front.
[35] PAUL RICŒUR, *Finitude et Culpabilité*. Points Essais 623. Paris: Éd. Points, 2009, 216.

protect the interests of the river. Other governments are moving in this direction, though the complexities of this move in the Western legal framework are proving challenging.[36]

Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees. What They Feel and How They Communicate* has become a bestseller and a substantial influencer of culture.[37] Together with his subsequent books, Wohlleben has popularized the notion of a forest as a social network which communicates not only with its own species, but with others as well. This sits well with the notion that the Earth has voice and–in some sense–sentience.

The popular imagination has been shaped by the movie *Avatar* (2009).[38] It tells the story of the Indigenous people of the planet Pandora who triumph over the destructive forces of intergalactic colonialism with the help of Jake Sully, one of the invaders. There is a central tree in this movie, the Tree of Souls, through which the people communicate with Eywa, the biological sentient guiding force of life on Pandora. The movie gives a vivid portrayal of an interconnected community of life that communicates across species, and has promoted a popular acceptance of an Earth voice.

However, the most significant shift of all in the intervening years has been the rise of Indigenous Voices and perspectives. The context of postmodernism and the burgeoning field of postcolonial thought have provided a backdrop to a stronger academic and cultural reception of Indigenous speakers, researchers and writers. There is not scope within this essay to do justice to this remarkable shift. Instead, I will give one example of the way the *voice of Earth* is heard by Indigenous people in the central desert of Australia. The voice is in fact the sound of water in the arid desert of central Australia.

An Indigenous Arrernte woman, Mali Njordah Cavanagh, took two second people[39] – out on a property called White Gums in the Western McDonald Ranges to encounter some of the Indigenous knowledge of the land. One of the visitors recounts the story of learning from this Arrernte woman how to hear the sound of the ghost gums drinking:

> 'And you, you put your ear to the tree. Be careful of the ants! You don't want the ants in your ears! But you put your ear on the tree and then you have to wait. You wait until you cannot hear your heart in your ears. You wait until you're calm. And everything is quiet. And then you will hear it. You will hear the water in the tree. You will hear the tree drinking from its deep root, right down into the water underneath. You will hear it.'
>
> Shauna was actually the first one to try it. She came to me quite elated and excited, saying 'Oh, you really can hear the water! We have to go somewhere and just be quiet and wait and listen.' So we went for a walk out into the bush a little way and found a ghost gum each and put our ears to it.
>
> And it's true that when you've been for a walk to one of these trees, you can only really hear your own heart beating in your ears for a while. So you have to become still and steady, and your heartbeat has to return to

[36] See PATRICK BARKHAM'S article in *The Guardian*, dated 25 July 2021 (accessed 2504/2023) https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/25/rivers-around-the-world-rivers-are-gaining-the-same-legal-rights-as-people

[37] First published as *Das geheime Leben der Bäume* in 2015 by the Ludwig Verlag in Munich, the Australian edition is published in 2016 (WOHLLEBEN, PETER. The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World. Carlton, VIC: Black Inc. Books, 2016).

[38] Avatar (2009) is the highest grossing movie of all time, which is an indication of its influence on popular culture.

[39] The term 'second peoples' is used by the Uniting Church in Australia to refer to immigrants to Australia and their descendants, irrespective of their ethnicity or places of origin. The term forms a contrast to First Peoples, or Indigenous peoples. The two second people in this account are Jeanette Acland and Shauna Beesley.

> its resting pace. And then I began to hear a ticking: tick, tick tick, tick…
>
> And then, as I breathed gently and listened deeply, I could hear the water, running through the reticulation system of the tree and underneath us, in the basin.
>
> It's a most extraordinarily beautiful thing. To be able to listen to a ghost gum drink.[40]

Is it legitimate to call this sound voice? If voice is understood as a sound that communicates something meaningful to the hearer, then certainly the sound was voice to the listeners.[41]

3. The meaning the Voice of Earth in ecological interpretation of the Bible

In this final section of the essay, I will advance my own understanding of the voice of Earth, proposing that the natural world does indeed have a symphony of sound that can be interpreted by the attentive listeners who have learned the way of the habitat and who are present in stillness and humility. A rich diverse tapestry of sound corresponds to Earth raising its voice in celebration; the muting and silencing of the sound corresponds to Earth's cry against injustice: a silent scream.

I understand the voice of Earth as a multiplicity of natural sounds, buzzing, humming, whirring, swarming, scratching, croaking, squawking, clicking, rustling, slithering, chirping, screeching, squabbling, preening. These are the types of sounds produced by living creatures, some of them through a larynx or syrinx, but many in other ways. To this list we should add such sounds as rippling, burbling, plopping and swooshing, the sounds of water, of trees stirring with a breath of wind and of grasses bending in the breeze. Such sounds are also part of the voice of Earth, though not produced by living fauna, but by water, soil, air and the myriad types of flora that rely on these things.

This voice of Earth intensifies at certain times of day–the dawn chorus of birds, for instance, which can be heard in natural bushland and rural areas, the sound of flocks of birds feeding, drinking, playing, and mating, or the sound of bats migrating to another feeding ground, together with the croak of frogs and the buzz of cicadas in the twilight.

Why call this polyphonous symphony of sound the *voice* of Earth, rather than the *sound* of Earth? The difference, I suggest, between the more general concept of *sound* and the more specific concept of *voice* is that the former refers to the audible quality or output that is produced and perceived, whereas the latter implies that in addition to the sound being produced and perceived, there is also an aspect of communication associated with that sound. *Voice*, I suggest, is linked to communication.

The rich multiplicity of sound–a polyphonous composition of interconnected creatures and their habitats–communicates vital information to their own kind and to other creatures. A richer and more balanced soundscape communicates the wellbeing of the habitat as a whole, as many species are involved and no one species dominates. The voice of a healthy ecosystem communicates safety and opportunities to its many creatures. The sudden silencing of a sound

[40] Jeanette Acland, personal communication, quoting Mali Njordah Cavanagh, August 2018. Knowledge quoted with permission from Mali Njordah Cavanagh.
[41] The Indigenous wisdom also included how to access the water and heal the tree, but no permission was given to cite this aspect.

or the addition of another new and unexpected sound communicates change, and potential threat. Such communication is happening moment by moment.

There are humans who are attuned to this as communication too–Indigenous peoples, who through generations of participation in habitats alongside animate and inanimate creatures have learned to attend to the symphony of sound and interpret it. They have learned to recognise the significance of the shifting soundscape over the seasons, to interpret it and to participate in it for the flourishing of the whole. The sound of the Earth community has become a voice communicating vital information to them. By the passing on of keen observation and experience through generations, Indigenous peoples preserve and interpret knowledge that spans millennia. Against the vista of intergenerational knowledge, the sound of Earth can be understood as the voice of Earth, communicating what is known and familiar and what is strange and unexpected.

Second peoples have some experience of a voice of Earth too. Those who live in rural areas, or whose livelihoods are closely connected with the land, are often attuned to seasonal sounds, which may at times be interpreted as the voice of Earth. Children who spend much time outdoors in places where the interconnected network of local species is relatively well may have a sense of a voice of Earth.[42] These contexts are becoming rarer, and the majority of humanity now lives in settings where sound and light pollution compound the loss of habitat and the imbalance of species, silencing both the sound and the voice of Earth.

In conclusion, the Earth Bible principles do not prescribe a method of biblical interpretation. Instead, they function heuristically, inviting a change in the interpreter's posture in relation to Earth, and thus also to the biblical text. The third Earth Bible principle challenges interpreters of the Bible to give careful attention to Earth as our kin, both in our lives and in our acts of biblical interpretation. It calls for a posture of attentiveness and humility that respects Earth as a subject. Ultimately it invites the interpreter to wrestle with what this shift in posture and perception might mean for a three-way discourse between self, Earth and the divine.

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Sound – Voice – Communication: A Response to Vicky Balabanski

Stefan Krauter

Assistenzprofessor für Neues Testament
Universität Zürich, Theologische Fakultät
stefan.krauter@uzh.ch

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25784/jeac.v5i1.1209

In her contribution to this issue, Vicky Balabanski attempts to explain the third eco-justice principle of the Earth Bible project, the *principle of voice*, and to clarify its meaning within an ecological biblical hermeneutics: "Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice." Is this just a metaphor, perhaps even an anthropomorphic and anthropocentric metaphor? She tries to show that it is not. Rather, she says that a concept of a voice of Earth can be developed in conversation between theology and other sciences, as well as including impulses from indigenous cultures. An ecological hermeneutics of the Bible must listen attentively to this voice and thereby try to overcome the anthropocentrism of the Christian tradition, but also of the Bible itself.

I would like to start my constructively critical reply with the final section of her rich and thought-provoking essay. There, Balabanski describes the diverse soundscape of an intact ecosystem. It is not just sound, but a voice. The added value of voice over sound is that "there is also an aspect of communication associated with that sound." She thus takes up the suggestion of Anne Elvey and Wendy Wheeler that all life is associated with semiosis.

My first, minor question is: Should one not also include the manifold forms of non-acoustic communication of living beings? Colors, shapes, smells, warmth, light, electrical impulses, etc.? Just as interpersonal communication between human beings consists to a large–perhaps even the larger–extent of non-verbal communication. The voice of Earth cannot be limited to sounds–as fascinating as the example of the audibly drinking ghost gum cited by Balabanski is. Does the focus on acoustic communication not run the risk of unconsciously perpetuating the narrowing of modern thought to human cognition, which marginalizes the embodiment and physicality of all life? Balabanski herself points out at the beginning of her essay that the voice of Earth should be understood more like music, that is, as acoustic but not verbal communication. She is, it seems to me, pursuing a similar idea as I am. But I think this could be strengthened by including other sensory impressions–including sensory impressions which humans have no direct access to, but which are perceptible and important for other living beings (e.g., infrasound or magnetism).

My second query goes a bit further: Should we not note that in all these cases of semiosis *something* is communicated? The sender and receiver of all these signals give them specific contents: They concern food, water, warmth, reproduction, orientation in space, or danger. These voices are first of all instrumental: they mean something to a living being, and usually relate to that being's vital interest(s). What they mean can vary depending on the sender and receiver: Humans perceive the earth's magnetic field, on which migratory birds orient themselves, only with technical aids. The pheromones that some insects use to attract sexual partners may not be perceived at all by certain mammals. These voices are "audible" only to some creatures, but remain "mute" to others. Pollinating insects and their plants communicate past each other in some ways: What communicates "food" to one means "reproduction" to the other–and yet they form a mutually supportive sub-ecosystem. Other cases of "misunderstanding" are less pleasant, at least for one of the parties involved: some creatures communicate "reproduction" and thereby become prey for predatory creatures that perceive "food."

This small-scale network of the most diverse voices which communicate with each other, against each other, over each other, or even past each other is obviously not the focus of Balabanski's interest but rather "the voice of Earth" that results from it as an overarching phenomenon: the balanced soundscape of a healthy ecosystem. In doing so, however, she moves to another level. This voice is not simply the simultaneous sounding of the many individual voices.

The question is now: Who perceives this total voice? As a non-expert who observes the findings of biology as an interested layman, I think it is not just humans. Living beings are not stimulus-response-robots that are only interested in their narrow section of this vast and complex communicative network. Rather, they have a kind of overarching perception of well-being. With some animals, which are very close to humans, like dogs, one can intuitively notice this as a human being. With others, this is not possible, but it can be proven or made plausible with technical methods, e.g., that noise under water caused by human activities triggers extreme stress in sea creatures. For other creatures, humans have no way of knowing or even imagining whether and how they perceive this voice.

Hearing the voice of Earth is therefore by no means an *exclusively* human ability. Nevertheless, the fact that people can hear it and how they hear it is specifically human. However, this ability is not equally pronounced in all people. One can also overhear this voice or even deliberately ignore it.

Balabanski rightly points out the role of indigenous first peoples. She also mentions members of second peoples who live in rural regions and are closely connected to nature. Because of my own cultural background, I have had no direct contact with indigenous people. For the second group of people mentioned by Balabanski, I would like to present a more nuanced assessment: People in agriculture or forestry–at least in my experience and from my knowledge of political debates–often have, in addition to their ability to perceive the voice of Earth, a very instrumental perception of the signals of the land on which and from which they live, focused on utility, exploitability, and economics. Some of them would consider "listening to the voice of Earth" to be unrealistic romanticism by city dwellers who are ignorant of the hardships and economic necessities of rural life. But that does not mean they do not try to

farm sustainably. They are often much more likely to do so than city dwellers who claim to be ecologically sensitive.

The extent to which people can and want to hear the voice of Earth, i.e., the totality of the sensually perceptible signs of a healthy ecosystem, is therefore unstable. Or formulated more positively: It remains a task to (re-)learn it.

The principle of voice of the Earth Bible project, however, goes beyond this. It claims that Earth raises its voice "in celebration and against injustice." This is again on another level. It is, as Balabanski tries to show, not "just a metaphor." It is not the same as the voice of Earth, understood as the "soundscape" of a healthy ecosystem. It is a human perception of this voice, its interpretation in human categories, and its verbalization with the help of human concepts. Does this mean that the hermeneutics is again anthropomorphically and anthropocentrically narrowed? Does this not undermine the fundamental concern of the Earth Bible project, which is not to talk *about* animals, plants, and ecosystems, but "*with*" them?

I do not think that is the case. One can perhaps make this clear with an analogous phenomenon: I am a male biblical scholar from a Western European country. Feminist, gender-theoretical, and postcolonial hermeneutics have demonstrated with great clarity that the central question is "Who speaks?" That is, it is not a question of me as a scholar writing *about* women, non-binary persons, or members of non-Western cultures and the Bible, but of them raising their voices and speaking themselves. If this is not to remain a monologue without a listener, my task is to listen and respond. But I can only perceive what they say *as me*. It would be presumptuous to pretend that I can slip into their role while listening. That is, I interpret what they communicate with my categories (hopefully not static ones, but ones that can be changed through learning). And I have to take what they say in my response and re-formulate it with my concepts (and in turn expose it to their criticism). There is no other way if understanding is to be possible at all.

From this perspective, the anthropomorphic metaphor of the principle of voice seems to me not only not harmful, but even appropriate. The principle could have been phrased much less anthropomorphically (as Balabanski does, after all, in the last section of her essay)–"celebration" and "injustice" are human, perhaps even specifically human concepts. But a less metaphorical and less anthropomorphic articulation of the principle might have obscured the fact that humans can only ever hear the voice of Earth *as humans*. As Balabanski sets out, taking up ideas from Martin Buber and Paul Santmire, this is about truly listening. It requires attentiveness, openness, and humility–ultimately a willingness to allow the concept one has of oneself as a human being to be questioned and changed. But precisely for this reason, one must perceive, interpret, and understand the voice of the Other, the voice of Earth, *as a human being*.

Therefore, the principle of voice is not "just a metaphor." Rather, it contains a meaningful or even necessary moment of the metaphorical. This metaphoricity is, it seems to me, biblically inspired. Balabanski herself points to Ps 19:2–5; one could add Ps 96:11–13, Rom 8:19, and several other texts. Perhaps my most critical inquiry in Balabanski's essay is why it is not more clearly marked that this is a biblically inspired metaphor.

The Earth Bible Project wanted to distinguish itself from the first attempts at ecological biblical interpretation in the 1970s and 1980s. Similar to the earliest feminist and liberation theological interpretations of the Bible, these tended to be apologetic: they wanted to rediscover the Bible as a "green" book in the face of criticism that held Western Christianity responsible for the ecological catastrophe. In contrast, the Earth Bible Project sought to read biblical texts with a hermeneutic of suspicion. It is not a matter of presupposing the authority of the Bible and merely reweighing its statements. Rather, the voice of Earth is to be heard as a critical counterpart to the biblical texts (in analogy to the voice of women, non-binary persons, or colonized cultures). This is a concern I understand and share.

I would like to give just one concrete exegetical example in the form of a text that is often overlooked. In 1 Tim, we find some of the strongest statements in the New Testament about creation: the goodness and beauty of all creation (1 Tim 4:4), God making all things alive (1 Tim 6:13), God giving all things abundantly (1 Tim 6:17). These statements serve to ward off worldless and disembodied notions of salvation. Thus, they could be important building blocks for an ecological theology of the New Testament. And yet, they also justify an extremely patriarchal social order, including slavery, subordination of women, and unrestricted consumption of meat. Thus, 1 Tim is an ambivalent biblical text. It certainly cannot be understood simply as a positive statement about creation, but must be critically questioned by listening to the voices of women, enslaved people, and farm animals.

Nevertheless, it seems problematic to formulate the principles of theological hermeneutics from an external standpoint. Moreover, it is confusing when one claims to do so, but nevertheless uses more or less biblically inspired ideas, formulations, and metaphors (as, e.g., also in the Earth Bible principle of purpose, which I find very problematic because of its linguistic proximity to notions of "intelligent design"). In contrast, I would rather argue that Christian theology is a reflection from an internal perspective. This must in no way be purely affirmative or apologetic. It must be self-critical. It must listen attentively, openly, and humbly to other voices, including the voice of Earth, and be willing to be fundamentally challenged by them. However, I do not think that it makes sense for it to veil or deny being Christian theology, that is, theology shaped by the Bible. Without any triumphalism, but with extreme humility, it should honestly admit that the decisive voice it listens to is God's voice.

Even this final critical question about Balabanski's essay does not change the fact that I agree in principle with her theses and the concerns of the Earth Bible Project. It is regrettable that after some promising approaches in the 1980s, ecological hermeneutics has almost completely disappeared in German-language biblical studies. I sincerely hope that the impulses of the Earth Bible Project and the Earth Bible Commentary series will be taken up and followed more strongly than before.