

## H. Ferreira

Ms H. Ferreira, Post-graduate student, Department of Old- and New Testament Studies, University of the Free State, South Africa.  
E-mail: hermiene@gmail.com  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7640-4468>

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## L. Sutton

Prof. L. Sutton, Department of Old- and New Testament Studies, University of the Free State, South Africa.  
E-mail: [Suttonl@ufs.ac.za](mailto:Suttonl@ufs.ac.za)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5502-5932>

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# Ecological hermeneutics as a current trend in Old Testament research in the Book of Psalms

## ABSTRACT

*This article addresses an urgent ecological crisis of this century. It explores the transformative potential of ecological hermeneutics as a current trend in Old Testament research in the context of the Book of Psalms. As we face the unprecedented ecological threat of global devastation, this article identifies a new kind of speech emerging from current ecological trends in biblical research. The article examines the historical implications of biblical texts in the discussion about ecological degradation by providing an overview of the development of ecological hermeneutics. It then presents methodologies such as dark green religion and the ecosadi approach and advocates for ways in which they reshape culture and have the potential to play a crucial role in reshaping it.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Decidedly one of the most daunting challenges facing human beings at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the widely recognised pressing issue of the ecological crisis. Hitherto, former generations have endangered and even eradicated entire species. Until now, the world has possessed neither the technological capacity nor the adroitness, in a literal sense, to transmogrify the earth, the ocean, and even the atmosphere. We face the ecological catastrophe that has exposed humankind to a level of destruction and devastation that threatens our very existence, or at the very least, the continuity

of communities and cultures as we know them (Rensberger 2014:608). What will happen within the next fifty years is uncertain, but it is clear that human behaviour is vital in averting an ecological catastrophe.

This article proposes that ecological hermeneutics is the next wave of contextual theology and that, in conjunction with the Psalms, it is a tool that can transform or reshape culture. It is recognised that a history of interpretation has negatively implicated the complicity of biblical texts in the ecological crisis.<sup>1</sup> This article aims to demonstrate that a new kind of speech, one emerging from current ecological trends in biblical research, offers a productive means for a new reading of biblical texts that have been interpreted in ways that justify or sanction humanity's dominion over the earth and all its inhabitants.

Through an overview of the development of ecological hermeneutics, followed by viewing ecological hermeneutics in the Psalms and providing future prospects, this article provides a roadmap for the development of ecological hermeneutics and its future potential as a methodological research lens for interpreting the Psalms.

## 2. DEVELOPMENT OF ECOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

Although widely recognised as one of the most urgent issues of the global community, the environmental movement and its ecological concerns have been active for decades. A plethora of works in the field of ecological theology

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1 This is reflected in Joranson & Butigan's *Cry of the environment: Rebuilding the Christian creation tradition* (1984). The title itself implies that the tradition in question has endured significant damage as it would not otherwise require "rebuilding". Santmire's *The travail of nature: The ambiguous ecological promise of Christian theology* (1985) explores the uncertain ecological implications of Christian theology's understanding of nature of the time. Fortin (1995:197-199) also affirms that the Bible and the traditions that have arisen from it have frequently been held responsible for the environmental catastrophe that threatens to engulf humanity. Marlow (2009:2-8) explores the contribution of an ecological interpretation of biblical text to modern environmental ethics in light of the concern over climate change and the environmental challenges associated therewith. Marlow (2009:20-48) explains that the Judaeo-Christian tradition has been partially attributed to fostering a negative perspective towards creation, hence justifying the exploitative utilisation of the earth's resources. Marlow (2009:48-70) examines the historical ideas within the Christian tradition that have influenced this perception, and then delves into several methods of interpreting the Old Testament from an ecological perspective. Furthermore, various studies have been conducted since the publication of White's (1967) article that placed the blame squarely on Judeo-Christian scriptures for the ecological crisis. These studies gathered evidence suggesting a nuanced connection between religion and environmental concern. For more information on these studies, see Eckber & Blocker (1989), Greeley (1993), and Bulbiia *et al.* (2016).

have been published since the early 1970s. Broader concerns in society have frequently stimulated new questions, inquiries, and innovative approaches in the field of biblical interpretation, and scholarly agreement<sup>2</sup> suggests that, broadly speaking, the impetus for the development of ecological hermeneutics is the growing understanding of how human activity affects the natural world. Carson's groundbreaking book *Silent spring* (1962), which highlights the effects of chemical pesticides on the environment, is a major factor in bringing this issue to the public's attention in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1971, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth were established and consequently, a growing body of knowledge emerged that reinforced the connections between human behaviour and the state of the natural world. In the 1980s, the discovery of the connection between chlorofluorocarbons and their effects on the ozone layer led to a coordinated international action which, particularly from the early 2000s, took seriously the reality of an impending ecological catastrophe based on the actions of humankind. We note this in a number of UN-sponsored meetings, from Rio de Janeiro in 1992 to Paris in 2015, that have attempted – some more successfully than others – to forge international consensus on how to tackle and address these challenges (Horrell 2022:20).

Ecological hermeneutics emerged within this global context. Horrell (2022:20) writes that, in a similar way to how Carson's *Silent spring* has been identified as “a landmark in the origins of the modern environmental movement”, so too we may identify another landmark when it comes to the forces that ignited the development of the field of ecological hermeneutics. One of the most widely referenced works on religion and ecology is White's seminal article titled “The historical roots of our ecologic crisis”. Since its publication in 1967, it has become the standard reference for research that explores the connection between, and perhaps even the interconnectedness of Christianity and the environmental catastrophe (Horrell 2022:20).

South African theologian Ernst Conradie (2004:124) believes that the kind of ecological theology that developed in response to White's article took on an apologetic approach. Based on White's (1962:1206) argument that the Christian tradition itself bears a “huge burden of guilt”, Conradie (2004:124) asserts that a world view placed Western Christianity squarely in the centre as the cause of the underlying ecological crisis. In his contribution to *The Oxford handbook of The Bible and ecology* (2022), Kidwell, whose chapter bears

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2 Horrell (2022:19-34) explains that ecological issues have become a central focus of political and ethical discussions. This is due to the impacts of a continually growing human population, coupled with the use of advanced industrial technologies to meet growing consumption demands, exacerbated by significant wealth inequalities. For causes of the environmental crisis, see Martin-Schramm & Stivers (2003:10-12), as well as Kidwell (2022:9-18).

nearly the same title as White's article, "The historical roots of *the* [instead of *Our*] ecological crisis", explains what he believes to be the basis of White's argument as follows:

The crux of this argument is that the presence of Christian values caused medieval Europe to become technologically enhanced at a more accelerated pace than other civilizations. It is important to note [however] that this thesis has subsequently been contested, particularly by historians of Islam.

Conradie (2004:124), among other scholars, notes that White's article is a variation of the work of Max Weber, whose analysis explores the relationship between Christianity and capitalism and who surmises that "Protestantism has encouraged capitalism, that, in turn, exploited nature". Kidwell (2022:11) elaborates on this as follows:

The ecologic crisis, driven by a relentless complex of modern science and technology is, according to White [(1967:1206)], ultimately caused by the 'Christian doctrine of creation'.

In this regard, Conradie (2004:124) believes that, to White, the step from the Christian notion of "dominion" to the insensate exploitation of nature for the benefit of humankind is a small one. For Kidwell (2022:11), White's description of "dominion", although mostly through the inference of biblical texts such as Genesis 1:26-28, was taken to endorse and sanction, in White's (1967:1206) words, "dominance over creatures".

In his contributing chapter to *The Oxford handbook of the Bible and ecology*, Horrell (2022), provides an overview of the three most prominent types of approaches to ecological hermeneutics. The first approach is "Re(dis)covering green theology and ethics in the Bible". In this instance, early biblical scholars addressed the critical issues raised by White and were primarily concerned with showing that the "infamous dominion verses" of Genesis 1:26-28 do not foster the kind of belligerent domination of nature that White identified (Horrell 2022:21). Barr (1972:30) argues that the biblical foundations of the creation doctrine would, contrary to White's arguments, "tend in the opposite direction, away from a license to exploit and towards a duty to respect and protect". More recently, in his book *God and the crisis of freedom* (2002), Bauckham<sup>3</sup> asserts that, within the context

3 See also Bauckham's (2010:10-45) thorough and insightful biblical inquiry into the connection between humankind and creation. Bauckham contends that the Bible's comprehension of this connection extends beyond the directive of human authority, as stated in Genesis 1, and asserts that the directive has frequently been used as justification to rationalise the subjugation and exploitation of the earth's resources. Bauckham also examines the ecological viewpoints presented in the Book of Job, the Psalms, and the Gospels. Bauckham (2010:204) concludes that these perspectives necessitate a reassessment of the biblical concept of "dominion".

of the Enlightenment and the advancement of Western science, the ideology of human domination over nature is not resultant of the biblical text in itself, but rather the interpretation thereof. Accordingly, the problem is not the text, but contextual misinterpretation (Horrell 2022:21).

A second approach is “The Earth Bible Project and the development of ecological hermeneutics”. Initiated at a symposium on Ecology and Religion in Adelaide in 1996, under the leadership of Norman Habel, this project may be credited for bringing the label “ecological hermeneutics” into biblical scholarship (Conradie 2004:127; Horrell 2022:23). The Earth Bible Project employs six “ecojustice principles”<sup>4</sup> that were conceived in conversation with scientists and ecologists and purposefully formulated, according to Horrell (2022:24), in “nontheological language”, in order to promote dialogue spanning across diverse disciplines. Noteworthy of this project are the research outputs that began with five edited volumes of essays published between 2000 and 2002 (Horrell 2022:24). Another volume of essays followed, emanating from the SBL seminar on Ecological Hermeneutics. In 2011 Habel inaugurated an ongoing series of Earth Bible commentaries (Horrell 2022:24). Unique<sup>5</sup> to the contributions of the Earth Bible series is its interest in retrieving the voice of the earth (Horrell 2022:24). In his introductory chapter to *Exploring ecological hermeneutics*, Habel (2008:3):

A radical ecological approach to the text involves a basic hermeneutics of suspicion, identification, and retrieval. This progression bears obvious similarities with several approaches to well-known feminist hermeneutics. The difference, of course, is that we are not reading from the worldview of women, but first and foremost from within the orientation of an ecosystem called Earth. We are reading as creatures of Earth, as members of Earth community in solidarity with Earth.

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- 4 The following six ecojustice principles were identified for biblical interpretation (Habel 2008:2):
1. Intrinsic worth: The universe, earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value.
  2. Interconnectedness: Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.
  3. Voice: Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.
  4. Purpose: The universe, earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.
  5. Mutual custodianship: Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners with, rather than rulers over, earth to sustain its balance and a diverse earth community.
  6. Resistance: Earth and its components not only suffer from human injustices, but also actively resist them in the struggle for justice.
- 5 Horrell (2002:25) takes note of two additional important features of the Earth Bible project. First, its origins in Australia have rooted the concerns and connectedness of land/earth within the project and, therefore, it inherently takes indigenous voices and perspectives seriously. Secondly, the critical and liberating hermeneutics that has been adopted shares methodological and ethical commitments with other perspectives, including feminist criticism.

A third approach is “The Exeter Project” which moves “towards a critical and theological ecological hermeneutic” (Horrell 2022:26). This project, directed by Horrell at the University of Exeter, collaboratively reflects, from 2006 to 2009, on the uses of the Bible in environmental ethics. Horrell (2022:26) elaborates on this as follows:

... a further attempt was made to develop an approach to ecological engagement with biblical texts that was explicitly intended to be both critical and constructive.

This approach is influenced by the work of Ernst Conradie, whose work is based on the interpretation of the Bible as a constructive act that is both shaped and influenced by the text, the modern context, and the various traditions of reading and interpreting represented within and beyond Christian theology (Horrell 2022:26). The approach of the Exeter project can, therefore, be described as one that engages in contemplative and meaningful exegesis. It is shaped by the scientific knowledge of the contemporary context for the purpose of giving the Bible a didactic role in the formation of modern ecotheology and ethics (Horrell 2022:26).

Now that half a century has passed since White’s article, with the majority of the time having been dedicated to the apologetic approach, proponents of ecological hermeneutics need to construct “new reference points and critical frames for environmental reflection” (Kidwell 2022:16), which has been taking place as we have seen. Negative representations of the complicity of biblical texts in the ecological crisis may be countered by embracing the notion that biblical texts are much more complex and dynamic than these representations suggest. In order to counter these harmful representations, it is, therefore, necessary to learn a new kind of speech, one that values the capabilities and contributions of biblical texts, particularly when it comes to a religious framework for ecological hermeneutics. The ensuing section elaborates on this religious framework for ecological hermeneutics, which may be considered a tool in the hands of human beings, with the potential to reshape culture.

### 3. ECOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS WITHIN THE PSALMS

What is ecological hermeneutics in the Psalms? This section provides a brief overview of selected publications to discuss ecological hermeneutics within the Psalms.

To situate or illustrate the place of humanity within the creation, Rensberger (2014:615-619) draws on three creation Psalms, namely 8, 104, and 148. These Psalms represent three distinct, although not irreconcilable, views of

the role of humankind within the created world. In Psalm 8, humankind is dominant, governing creatures as in verse 6, for example: “You have given them dominion (מַשִּׁלָּם)<sup>6</sup> over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet” (NIV). In Psalm 148, humankind does not hold a superior place and instead offers praises alongside all of creation: sun, moon and shining stars (v. 3); waters above the heavens (v. 4); sea monsters and all deeps (v. 7); fire, hail, snow and frost and stormy winds (v. 8), and so it continues. In Psalm 104, even more so than in Psalm 148, humankind offers a detailed survey of the entire life of all of creation. Beasts of the field (v. 11), wild donkeys (v. 11), cattle (v. 14), and wild goats (v. 18) are all indexed; even the sea (יָם), which is “alien territory” (Rensberger 2014:617) to ancient Israel, is mentioned.

The Psalms provide a reference point for the modern idea of ecological niches through its focus on the habitats of creation and, although humankind occupies its own niche, it is not separated from the rest of creation. Resenberger (2014:619) provides insightful concluding remarks on these three Psalms. For those who believe in the apparent and divinely appointed human supremacy in the natural world, Psalm 8 provides affirmation. However, it also highlights the fact that this supremacy is contingent and “suggests humility and accountability as indispensable factors in it” (Rensberger 2014:617). For those who prioritise worship and devotion as the quintessence of their spiritual and religious existence, Psalm 148 presents a renewed vision of a “praising universe” (Rensberger 2014:617). Rensberger (2014:647) eloquently pens:

[t]o live in this world, below stars, among hurricanes, cedars, and ‘feathered fowls’ (Geneva Bible), is to dwell in the midst of praise, respecting our fellow-worshippers.

Psalm 104 highlights the daily nature of life that has been created and the attentive care the Creator provides. All creatures have inherent worth, independent of their serviceability to humankind, and their Creator ensures that their needs are met (Rensberger 2014:617). In this instance, the role of humankind is to observe the surrounding world, marvel at its vastness and interconnectedness, while also recognising the omnipresence of divine wisdom that exists in every aspect of the world, not solely in what “serves and pleases us” (Rensberger 2014:617).

More recently, in 2017, Viviers published an article entitled “Is Psalm 104 an expression (also) of dark green religion?”, in which he draws on the work of Taylor (2010). Taylor (2010:13) observes that, while the environmental distress

6 תַּמְשִׁלָּם which is the hifil imperfect of מָשַׁל can be translated as: “you have made them to have dominion”.

has steadily increased to almost apocalyptic levels, “a nature-related religion [had] been rekindled, invented, spread, and ecologized”. Taylor (2010:13) refers to this religious creativity as “dark green” and can be defined as:

flowing from a deep sense of belonging to and connectedness in nature, while perceiving the [E]arth and its living systems to be sacred and interconnected. Dark green religion is generally deep ecological, biocentric, or ecocentric, considering all species to be intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable apart from their usefulness to human beings.

Viviers investigates Psalm 104 from this perspective and with the interest of a modern reader who considers the potential of identifying possible “dark green values” of this Psalm and its subsequent inspiration to a modern audience. Viviers (2017:4-7) examines the notions of belonging, interconnectedness, and sacredness to affirm the Psalm’s “dark green sentiments”. An interesting connection is made in the article between the emotion of awe and the notion of sacredness. When we consider Psalm 104, we are reminded that the “divine” – whether spoken of in anthropological terms, as a life-giving/life-affirming force, or Creator – remains ineffable (Viviers 2017:7). Awe, veneration, reverence, and joy are identifiable throughout the Psalm and its beginning, middle, and end continually nudge our side with its elbow: “O Lord my God, you are very great” (v. 1); “O Lord, how manifold are your works!” (v. 24); “Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord!” (v. 35)

naturalist versions of dark green religion (‘Naturalistic Animism’, ‘Gaian Naturalism’, [acknowledge] the life-force instead of a personal ‘god’) ... express their acknowledgement of nature’s intrinsic worth in well-known religious jargon. Awe, wonderment, miracle and so on are common words used, as they experience the same religious-like emotions of believers (Viviers 2017:7).

Westermann (1989:250) remarks that even non-believers cannot but utter “O God” in the presence of nature, much like our psalmist. Psalm 104 also presents us with a non-hierarchical relationship of human beings and other living creatures. There is no anthropocentrism: human beings and other living creatures live harmoniously together, each in their own right – cattle eat from the greenery (רְחֵצִיר) of the earth and so do human beings (עֲשׂוּב); lions hunt by night and human beings labour by day until evening (vv. 21-23).

What are the contributions of “dark green religion” in this instance? Dark green religion emphasises the intrinsic worth of nature in a way that is the religious equivalent of the “sacred”. It underscores a sense of belongingness in nature and the interconnected and interdependent relationship between earth and all its inhabitants. Dark green religion becomes manifest in diverse ways – from movements and artworks to film – and it unites groups of people



who would not ordinarily associate with one another, such as those who hold supernaturalist and naturalist viewpoints (Viviers 2017:7). The latter, according to Viviers (2017:7), cannot abscond the religious-like experience (and jargon) when witnessing the “miracle” of nature. In this day and age, with the ecological crisis being what it is, shared common ground between the aforementioned viewpoints and its inferred imperative to act in the best interest of earth and all its inhabitants cannot but be advantageous. To Viviers (2017:7), the poet of Psalm 104 evinces the quintessence of the modern understanding of dark green religion: from its colourful depictions of the splendour of the earth to its vivid encapsulation of harmonious living. This supernaturalist version of dark green, with its language of awe and reverence, stands in the midst of the overwhelming beauty and miracle that is nature which can be shared by those who opt for naturalism. Viviers’ (2017:7) concluding remarks are as follows:

... even (agnostic) David Attenborough, can express his ‘ecstatic’ delight in nature, similarly to that of the ancient, believing poet of Psalm 104:24 ‘How wonderful your work O God’...

We can recall the abovementioned potential reshaping of culture and turn to Rensberger (2014:608) who states:

What tools do humans possess for such a reshaping of culture? Among many that might be named, surely two of the most important are religion and art.

Both have played a crucial role in the formation and preservation of human cultures and both can contribute to its transformation. To Rensberger (2014:608), the Psalms occupy a space at the nexus of religion and art since they are religious art and religious poetry, “they are artistic religion, religion chanted and sung”. Their pervasiveness in both Judaism and Christianity has profoundly influenced the cultures in which these religions not only are present but also have contributed to create (Rensberger 2014:608). The Psalms have the potential to significantly contribute to the ecological transformation of culture, akin, according to Rensberger (2014:608) to a cultural conversion. One might then ask, and Rensberger (2014:608) does, whether the Psalms are able to endure this role and whether poems, melodies, and songs from cultures so distant in time have potential value in addressing this distinctly 21<sup>st</sup>-century dilemma?

This is quite a burden of responsibility to place on poems! Rensberger (2014:609), however, lists three perspectives that suggest that the Psalms are indeed capable of such a task. First, the world view in the Psalms stands in stark contrast with the “man versus nature” perspective of modern culture. Its harmonic stance towards the nonhuman world may, therefore, lay before

modern culture the opportunity to retreat from its aggressive approach towards nature and instead adopt one that is open to coexistence with all creation. Secondly, we may turn to the ancient principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the rule of prayer is the rule of faith) as a reminder that Psalms prayed and sung can shape the world view of those who voice them. This, of course, would pertain to the Psalms that contain elements conducive to transformation; those that encourage living *with* or *in* the earth instead of *against* it. Thirdly, Rensberger (2014:609) affirms that there certainly are Psalms that are capable of, and even indispensable to the transformation or reshaping of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century culture which is considered a vital aspect of the future of ecological hermeneutics. This is discussed in the next section.

#### 4. FUTURE PROSPECTS OF ECOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS WITHIN THE PSALMS

In the steadily growing field of ecological hermeneutics that uses insights from a variety of overlapping scholarly foci in order to read ancient texts in new – or renewed – ways, the intersection of ecology and feminist or post-colonial studies has not been as prominent as one would expect. It may be that the dominant approach of scholars in ecological theology has, for a long time, been aimed at defending Christianity and its complicity in the ecological crisis against such accusations of White (1962:1204-1207). This section considers the work of Elvey, for a brief overview of ecological feminist hermeneutics, and Masenya, for ecological hermeneutics and post-colonialism, to illustrate what are viewed as examples of the future of ecological hermeneutics.

Elvey (2022:35) begins with explaining that, although ecological feminist thinking has multiple points of origin, the term “ecofeminism” has typically been attributed to French socialist feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne – to whom the devastation of the environment, militarism, and the oppression of women were all related to patriarchy and market capitalism. Ecological feminist approaches within biblical studies that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s predominantly applied a hermeneutic of suspicion to point out the androcentric and anthropocentric significance of biblical texts, in order to, according to Elvey (2022:38):

[analyze] ways in which selected biblical literature, and dominant themes in and reception of that literature, had been implicated in processes of colonization and militarism, noting that colonization and war have more-than-human, not solely human, impacts.

Antislavery and feminist movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though critical of some aspects of biblical religion, were informed by biblical visions of justice and liberation. These movements for abolition and suffrage, which were sometimes in tension even with one another, were inspired by prophetic justice and the *imago Dei* (Elvey 2022:39). The feminist, liberationist, and ecological feminist ethics that emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were descendants of those that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and they not only evaluated biblical texts in light of their ethical principles, but also had biblical religion as a source of those principles. It is, therefore, not surprising

that feminist ecological, and ecological feminist readings of biblical texts apply hermeneutics of suspicion, reconstruction, and retrieval, in modes of reading that resist and recover biblical ideologies and ethics (Elvey 2022:39-40).

With this in mind, contributions to an ecological feminist hermeneutics arise from multidisciplinary theologies and address biblical and Christian traditions from specific contexts. Masenya (2010:55-57) described the key elements of her *eco-bosadi* hermeneutics, of which a few will briefly be mentioned:

- The *bosadi* approach acknowledges the uniqueness of the context of African-South African women.
- The approach acknowledges the common points between the Israelite and African world views. If we acknowledge that both the Israelite and (Northern Sotho) African world views are holistic, we will agree that such an outlook, if taken seriously in our hermeneutical endeavours, can save us from the dualistic Western mentality. This has contributed immensely to the historical marginalisation of earth and women.
- In its analysis of the context of the reader, the *bosadi* approach highlights the significance of the element of faith in the life of an African woman in her encounter with the Bible.
- The *bosadi* approach is not only critical of the biblical text; it also criticises the African culture. The oppressive elements of this culture on earth and on women are challenged and resisted while the positive elements are embraced.
- The *eco-bosadi* perspective can be defined as a perspective of the Bible that takes seriously, not only the experiences of an African-South African woman, but also of earth itself which, like women, has been marginalised and oppressed for so long.

In a nature-conscious reading of Psalm 23, Masenya (2022:58-60) views the text from a post-colonial-ecological biblical hermeneutic and seeks the following clues in the text:

As a justice-seeking hermeneutic, it will ask the following questions among others: What about nature? Are there anthropocentric elements in which human concerns appear more urgent than the concerns of nature? Are there traces of the disruption of the harmony that could have existed between humans and nature and if so, how may such be restored? Even more importantly, if read from the African community-conscious perspective, which insights may the preceding reading bring?

Masenya's (2022:58-60) reading considers the imagery of the psalm and its contextual meaning with the African notions that attest to holistic connectedness and interconnectedness of human beings with nature. She concludes her reading saying that, although at face value the scenario presented by Psalm 23 may appear to be foregrounding other members of the ecosystem perhaps even better than human beings, yet underlying the lessons communicated by the Psalm is the care of Yahweh for the poor, the exploited, and the oppressed human being.

Nature-conscious readings such as the above by Masenya emphasise a number of critical elements that are vital for the future of ecological hermeneutics. First, the future of ecological hermeneutics will increasingly need to address ecological concerns. By posing questions concerning nature and the role human beings play in shaping nature, it is a methodology that recognises the significance of taking into account the environment and non-human elements within biblical texts. This shift from an exclusively anthropocentric perspective to one that incorporates the natural world is consistent with the current global trend promoting sustainability and ecological consciousness. Secondly, this methodology promotes the identification and critical examination of anthropocentric components that were previously considered to promote human concerns to the detriment of nature. Recognising the interdependence of all things in the universe therefore promotes the investigation of ways in which biblical texts can inspire, promote, and guide ecological restoration and harmony between human beings and nature. Thirdly, reading the Bible through the lens of an African community-consciousness brings to light distinctive insights that may be overlooked in conventional Western interpretations. Biblical texts may be interpreted in novel ways through the lens of a specific hermeneutic which emphasises the holistic interconnectedness of human beings and nature, and which reveals meanings that are consistent with the experiences and world views of specific communities. The existence of such interconnectedness implies that the

well-being of nature is inextricably linked to that of humanity. Subsequent biblical interpretations that integrate this particular perspective may foster a theology that reflects the complexities of the world. Lastly, by questioning the disruption of harmony between human beings and nature and seeking ways to restore it, such ecological hermeneutic approaches advocate for and support redemptive and restorative interpretation of texts. It encourages interpreters to seek out biblical principles that can guide contemporary efforts to mend the relationship between human beings and the environment.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article provided the global context of the world from which ecological hermeneutics has emerged. It discussed current ecological research within the Psalms and provided future prospects for its application within the Psalms. It noted that negative representations of the complicity of biblical texts in the ecological crisis may be countered by learning a new kind of speech that values the capabilities and contributions of biblical texts within the discussion of ecology.

What does the new kind of speech sound like? It sounds like dark green religion that emphasises the intrinsic worth of nature, in a way that is the religious equivalent of the "sacred"; that underscores a sense of belongingness in nature and the interconnected and interdependent relationship between Earth and all its inhabitants, and that unites unlikely viewpoints such as those of naturalists and supernaturalists. It sounds like an *eco-bosadi* approach that views the Bible as having taken sides with the oppressed condition of e-arth and aims at its liberation (Masenya 2010:57). It sounds like postcolonial hermeneutics that facilitates both our search and retrieval of the previously silenced perspectives of colonial subjects (both human and nature) in biblical texts such as Psalm 23 (Masenya 2022:60). Furthermore, it affirms the idea that biblical texts, particularly the Psalms, have the potential to reshape culture since Psalms offer a diversity of guideposts that lead us towards the same goal: a life lived wisely and justly, in obedience to the Creator and in harmony with all creation (Rensberger 2014:619).

Ecological hermeneutics may indeed be a next wave of contextual theology as Conradie (2004:126) stated already in 2004. It has now joined the ranks of liberation, Black, feminist, womanist, and indigenous theologies in an effort to discover a theology capable of addressing and responding to the contemporary challenges of our time.

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