The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics

The environmental crisis has prompted religious leaders and laypeople to look to their traditions for resources to respond to environmental degradation. In this book, Mari Joerstad contributes to this effort by examining an ignored feature of the Hebrew Bible: its attribution of activity and affect to trees, fields, soil, and mountains. The Bible presents a social cosmos in which humans are one kind of person among many. Using a combination of the tools of biblical studies and anthropological writings on animism, Joerstad traces the activity of nonanimal nature through the canon. She shows how biblical writers go beyond sustainable development, asking us to be good neighbors to mountains and trees, to be generous to our fields and vineyards. They envision human communities that are sources of joy to plants and animals. The biblical writers’ attention to inhabited spaces is particularly salient for contemporary environmental ethics in their insistence that our cities, suburbs, and villages contribute to flourishing landscapes.

Mari Joerstad is a research associate at the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, where she works on “Facing the Anthropocene,” a project funded by the Henry Luce Foundation.
The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics
Humans, Nonhumans, and the Living Landscape

MARI JOERSTAD
Duke University
# Contents

_Acknowledgments_ | page vii
---|---
1. Introduction | 1
   - Two Trees: Fryd and Glede | 1
   - Two Aims: Exegesis and Ecology | 3
   - Strangeness and Ethics | 7
   - Outline | 12
   - Introduction | 14
   - “New Animism” | 19
   - Metaphor and Relationality | 37
   - Personalistic Nature Texts and Patience | 45
   - Introduction | 48
   - Genesis | 48
   - Exodus | 70
   - Leviticus | 72
   - Numbers | 80
   - Deuteronomy | 87
   - A Note on Idioms and Metonymy | 94
   - Conclusion | 95
   - Introduction | 99
   - War | 101
   - Theophany | 110
## Contents

| Address                        | 122 |
| Grief                          | 139 |
| Joy                            | 145 |
| Conclusion                     | 154 |

5 An Articulate World: Personalistic Nature Texts in the Writings

| Introduction                   | 157 |
| Declaration in the Psalms      | 158 |
| Job’s Negotiation with His Place | 171 |
| Boundaries and Bliss           | 184 |
| Conclusion                     | 193 |

6 Conclusion: Befriending the World

| Avenues for Further Study      | 197 |
| What Is the Good of a Concept? | 201 |
| Living Together: Patricia Johanson and Jules Renard | 210 |
| Religious Communities and Climate Change | 216 |
| The Promise of Delight         | 219 |

**Bibliography**

| General Index                  | 239 |
| Bible Index                    | 242 |
This book has been a labor of love. Not only because I have loved working on it, but because the love of so many people have supported me in the writing of it.

First, thank you to my advisor Ellen Davis, who had confidence in me and my tree-hugger dissertation. This manuscript owes more than I can say to her careful attention and ongoing support.

Thank you also to my committee – Jennie Grillo, Anathea Portier-Young, Stephen Chapman, and Barbara Rossing – who offered thoughtful feedback and challenging questions.

Beatrice Rehl, Terence Fretheim, Stephanie Gehring Ladd, Blair Wilner, and Laura Lieber generously agreed to read and respond to this manuscript at a workshop sponsored by the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. Thank you for giving your time and thoughts to help me improve this book! Thank you also to Kenan and its director, Suzanne Shanahan, for providing the funds to bring the group together.

The group Writing and Academic Work at Duke’s English Department has been invaluable as a space to explore academic writing and its potentials. Thank you especially to Toril Moi, Sarah Beckwith, and Cathy Shuman for all your work in organizing the group.

Norman Wirzba put me in touch with Cambridge University Press. Thank you for helping this manuscript along on its journey from my drawer into the real world.

Jedediah Purdy, Norman Wirzba, and the Henry Luce–funded project Facing the Anthropocene have given me time and space to revise and tinker, a valuable gift in a time of overtaxed schedules.
And finally, thank you to all the people who have provided me with companionship and friendship along the way. This book is an exploration of what it might mean to be friends with persons who are not human; it is because of you that I know the value of friendship in the first place. Thank you to my lovely Durham friends, who always make time for happy hour. To Ambereen, Zaid, and Amal: it is my delight to try (and mostly fail) to foil your constant insistence that every meal is on you. To Shannon, Yeon Joo, and Bradley – I cannot think of better people to eat and talk with. Most of my thoughts in some way depend on conversations with you. To my family, who know how to enjoy time and pay attention to the beauty of the world. And to Tyler, who daily shares with me Qoheleth’s wonderful task:

Go, eat your bread with gladness, drink your wine with a happy heart, for God already approves of your work. Let your clothes always be white, and do not let oil be lacking from your head. Enjoy life with a [man] whom you love, all the days of your fleeing life that are given to you under the sun, all the days of your fleetingness. For this is your portion in life and in your toil, at which you toil under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 9:7–9)