

## Book Review

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Joerstad, Mari. *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Human, Non-Humans, and Living Landscape*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 254 pp. ISBN (10): 1-1084-7644-9.

**Abstract:** The environmental issues in the present world have raised certain serious concerns about the safety of not only the present generation but also of the future generations. The perils of environmental degradation and the use of finite resources by undermining the values of sustainability are very serious, and the Governments, Institutions, and people in general need to continuously strive for raising awareness and make concerted efforts to adapt and mitigate the ill effects of climate change. *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics* is a well-timed addition to scholarship, integrating the writings from religious and social sciences in order to influence the reader to take practical actions, for people and the planet.

**Keywords:** Hebrew Bible; Environmental Issues; Environmental Ethic; Human Communities.

Mari Joerstad, in her work, *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Human, Non-Humans, and living Landscape*, unveils the inherent aspects of Hebrew religious perceptions pertaining to the relationship between people, ecology, climate change and sustainability. The author is a Research Associate at the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, North Carolina. With the support of various narratives in the Bible, the author presents "nonanimal nature as active and alive, that is, as persons" (2), and "calls on us to be good neighbours" (155), a "life together" with the non-human world. The social cosmos of the Hebrew Bible is

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presented by the author as a road map to fulfil the sustainable development goals, peace and prosperity for people and planet.

There are six Chapters in this book, including an "Introduction" and "Conclusion." The biblical landscape presents to a careful reader that nature and nonhuman creatures have an emotional life as well as a moral life; they are participants in God's covenant. The author specifically correlates some of the aspects of non-human beings with that of environmental problems. For example, if the earth and the sky had the ability to watch, like human beings, they would be careful about environmental concerns. They would be witnesses on the Day of Judgment, though, God does not need the witnesses as God is a witness to everything we think, plan, and do. The debate on sustainability and environmental protection transcends from economical dimensions to the ethical and religious aspects of human living in collaboration with all beings in this common home.

In this book, Joerstad explored the landscape of the Hebrew Bible from the creation text of the *Genesis* to the *Songs of Songs*, with an aim to challenge the readers to take rational and ethical climate actions for environmental sustainability. The nature is demanding responsible actions from us; otherwise, the nature we see, the wind we feel, and sounds of water we hear will be extinct in the coming times, and the coming generations will think of these things in the same manner we think of dinosaurs and other species that are extinct.

Taking the dual roles of both an artist as well as an exegete, the author critically explores the contemporary mind-set of people with the ways the ancient Israelites used to think about the environment. The people of ancient Israel used to take non-human beings of the nature more aesthetically and morally than in comparison to the present generation. According to the author, the collaborations amongst persons, and between persons and non-persons are crucial to counter the prevailing and impending challenges and risks.

In the "Introduction" (1-13), the author makes clear the twofold exegetical and ecological objectives of the book: to

interpret biblical texts and "to consider how engaging with the Bible's active understanding of nonhuman nature might influence our ethics in the scope and nature of contemporary environmental actions" (3). The objective of the book is to investigate how biblical writers go beyond sustainable development and have an ethical position that advocates us to be good neighbours to mountains and trees, and to be generous to our fields and vineyards, and to live happily. Understanding and interpreting a text is not simply an intellectual exercise but it is an exercise in how to live well.

Chapter Two, titled "Interacting with the World" (14-47), provides the reader the theoretical basis using the interpretational tools of metaphor theory and new Animism, bringing insights out of the personalist nature of the texts. Metaphors attribute human experiences to nature and animism, ascribe agency and personhood, activity and affect to trees, fields, soil, and mountains. The writer creatively integrates and discusses the metaphorical use of nature in her book and proposes an environmental ethic. Nearly every inherent quality of human beings is present in these things, and the reason for the discussion of these in her book is to integrate the moral, rational, critical and other approaches to counter various environmental issues. She gave these attributes to the non-living beings for the sake of improving human relations with them because these relationships are important for human survival and wellbeing, and moral life demands a sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship with all creatures.

Chapter Three, "A Watchful World" (48-98) explores the personalistic nature of the texts of the Torah: how the earth and ground are active partners in God-human interactions, providing us with glimpses into the theanthropocosmic life of the ancient Israel. Non-human nature possesses qualities of human beings like seeing, witnessing, fighting, mourning, dancing, swallowing, vomiting, guidance, obedience, and singing. The earth that "brought forth vegetation, plants" (Genesis 1.12) "opened its mouth to receive the blood" (Genesis 4. 11) of Abel from the hands of Cain. The heap of stones serves as witness (Genesis 31.48, 52) and Moses requests earth and heavens to hear his words

(Deuteronomy 32:1). The author interprets these similes and metaphors used in the Hebrew Bible to argue for a responsible and joyful environmental ethics for contemporary living.

In Chapter Four, titled "A Sentient World" (99-156), the author explores similar personalistic traits in Prophets. The Chapter is organised into five themes: war, theophanies, address, joy, and grief. For example, Isaiah 24:4 laments that the world "languishes and withers" for grief and as the exiled people returns, mountains and hills to burst into jubilation and forests to applaud (Isaiah 55:12). Trees, stars, and waters all participate in warfare when their beloved people, their companions, are under threat. Following the path of biblical authors, the author advocates bringing the nature to mediate the divine encounters and intervention of God in the life of Israel. "... describing human experiences of meeting YHWH is so difficult that it requires drawing on more than everyday emotions and terms. How do I feel when YHWH arrives? I feel like the storm clouds, like the moon in eclipse, like the tremors of a quake, like rock blistering into lava" (115). The Prophets challenge us to "live in such a way so as not only to stave off ecological apocalypse, but so that animals, trees, and pasture lands may be pleased to host us, to live alongside us" (155).

Following the order of referring to the books of the Bible, after investigating the books of Torah and Prophets for an environmental ethic, Chapter Five, with the title "An Articulate World" (157-195) investigates the Writings. The Psalms express vividly the life of chosen people as expressed in the nature: "the pastures of the wilderness overflow [and] the hills gird themselves with joy ... they shout and sing together for joy" (65:13 and 14). The Book of Job laments over the sufferings of the innocent, and requests the land not to treat him the way it treated Cain (16:18) and to bear witness to his innocence.

The "Conclusion" (196-220) speaks about "Befriending the world." Humans, animals, plants, and lands form a social cosmos and interdependent on one another for their survival, nourishment, flourishing, and well-being. We participate in a shared form of life in our common home. The book concludes

with a short section titled "The Promise of Delight," showing the readers the possibility of joy, given a restored relationship between human beings and the nonanimal world." "[I]f we pay attention, if we act with circumspection, respect, and love, we might be met by a host of friends, a community that extends beyond our humanness, beyond our limited knowledge" (220).

This is a book worth reading because it focuses on the integral part of our lives, our existence, our duties and our responsibilities towards us and the nature that surrounds us. This book compels us to listen to the inherent voice of the earth, sky, mountains, rivers, and trees, to comprehend their needs, demands, rights, and desires by the outstanding similitude between religious writings, metaphors, social sciences and examples. This book is a masterpiece of compassion towards the non-human aspects of our environment. The author's compelling arguments and critical thinking affect the inherent nature of the reader to take practical actions rather than endorsing these implications. It is written not for the commercial gains but for real change in the behaviour of people, institutions, and nations.

The creative combination and unique correlation between social sciences and environmental ethics with the Hebrew Bible inform and challenge the readers not only to raise awareness about environmental issues but also to take sustainable action, locally as well as globally. All the important blessings, which we enjoy for our wellbeing, are due to environment and nature. If there is no nature, there is no ecosystem, and if there is no ecosystem, then there is no life and consequently, there is nothing as important as protecting and promoting the harmony between nature and our ways of living. Drawing principles and values to live by in the present world from the ways of living as given in the religious scriptures is not only surprising for many in the secular contemporary world but also reaffirming for religious believers. The life of the people of ancient Israel connects to problems, which are extremely important and present in today's world, and gives a moral code that is relevant in dealing with the issue of sustainable development.