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# ECOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF WAR

Engagements with Biblical Texts

T&T CLARK BIBLICAL STUDIES

Edited by  
**ANNE ELVEY**  
**AND KEITH DYER**  
WITH DEBORAH GUESS

B L O O M S B U R Y



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**In memory of Ross Langmead (1949–2013)**

*colleague and friend*

*conversation partner in ecological theology, intercultural  
and interfaith engagements, and biblical reflection*

*song maker*

*lover of wild places*



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Begun in hope, this volume is part of a larger and ongoing project bringing religious and theological perspectives to questions concerning where ecology and warfare intersect. The project began with a symposium on 28 September 2015 at Trinity College Theological School within the University of Divinity in Melbourne, Australia. We are grateful to the presenters at the symposium, several of whom are published in this volume, and to the participants who shared their passion for peace-making and Earth care on the day, especially the keynote speaker, Dr Jenny Grounds, a General Practitioner working in a rural practice, past-president of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War. In 2015, the University of Divinity supported the project with a small research grant which made initial work on this volume possible; in-kind support was also received from Trinity College Theological School, Whitley College and the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy. We extend our thanks to our colleagues in these bodies. Recently, the University of Divinity has launched a Centre for Religion and Social Policy taking over and extending the work of the Yarra Institute, and we look forward to working with the Centre as our project continues. We are grateful to each of the contributors in the volume, as well as to the anonymous peer reviewers of the essays published here. Particular thanks go to our colleague in the UK, Professor David Horrell, for his generosity in reading all the essays and writing the closing essay by way of response. We thank Vagabond Press for permission to reproduce verses from Ali Cobby Eckermann's important poem 'Intervention Payback' in Anne Elvey's essay.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
AeJT	<i>Australian eJournal of Theology</i>
AsJT	<i>Asian Journal of Theology</i>
ArBib	The Aramaic Bible
AYB	Anchor Yale Bible
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Reprinted with corrections. Oxford, 1972
BEATAJ	Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CBR</i>	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
<i>Colloquium</i>	<i>Colloquium: The Australian and New Zealand Theological Review</i>
<i>COS</i>	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by W. W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden, 1997–
<i>CurTM</i>	<i>Currents in Theology and Mission</i>
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>HS</i>	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JANES</i>	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</i>
<i>JFSR</i>	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
JSPSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplement Series
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>

NJPS	<i>Tanakh Hebrew–English: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTL	New Testament Library
OIC	Oriental Institute Communications
OTL	Old Testament Library
<i>Pacifica</i>	<i>Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies</i>
<i>Proof</i>	<i>Prooftexts</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>SCE</i>	<i>Studies in Christian Ethics</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 8 vols. Grand Rapids, 1974–
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
<i>TWOT</i>	<i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by R. L. Harris and G. L. Archer Jr. 2 vols. Chicago, 1980
<i>VJTR</i>	<i>Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

# 1

## INTRODUCTION: ECOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF WAR – ENGAGEMENTS WITH BIBLICAL TEXTS

Keith Dyer and Anne Elvey

Attempting to address ecology, war and biblical texts from both Testaments in one collection of essays is at least ambitious, and possibly foolhardy. Not to attempt to address them in today's world would be short-sighted and dangerous. For some in Western politics and academics, religion is seen as a major cause of contemporary wars and ecological disasters; biblical and theological voices are suspect as 'part of the problem'. This is understandable, perhaps, but even if the charge is true, avoidance of the causes is inadequate to address the realities that confront us.

So we have made a beginning with a group of scholars who care as passionately about contemporary ecological justice and peace as they do for the beloved texts they study and teach, and perhaps more so. Are the sacred texts themselves to blame for the catastrophic legacy we have inherited and compounded? Is it rather the centuries of androcentric interpretation and misappropriation of those same texts to shore up imperial and colonial exploitation of the planet and its peoples that we should excoriate? And what of our own location as Australian commentators in a settler colonial nation that has enthusiastically supported every overseas war embarked on by our allies, but won't even admit to the only war we have engaged in on our own soil – against the Indigenous inhabitants of this land?<sup>1</sup>

1. See further, A. Elvey, K. Dyer and D. Guess, 'Ecological Aspects of War: Imagining Creaturely Mission', *Australian Journal of Mission Studies* 10, no. 2 (December 2016): 40–48. As for the 'undeclared war' on the Indigenous peoples of Australia and its consequences, in the context also of their encounter with Christianity, see J. Harris, *One Blood* (Sutherland: Albatross, 1990).

Even as we write this introduction, the dominant voices in our Government (said by some to be the ‘Christian right’) are not persuaded by the evidence that human activity affects climate change, and are supporting the opening of a huge new coal mine next to the Great Barrier Reef. Their key text may well be a certain (mis)reading of Gen. 1.28: ‘God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”.’

These same voices are amongst those who have turned our Customs agency into a Border Force to keep out asylum seekers (especially Muslim ones) arriving by boat, and who have been advocating that we commit troops on the ground in Syria (not just jets and drones above the ground). The relationship between religion, environment and war in this ‘most secular of nations’ urgently requires our attention, even if we are not sure how to do it or where to start.

Such are the imponderable questions we wish to begin addressing. These are not just questions for the Jewish and Christian traditions to wrestle with, as in this collection of articles. They are significant in different and related ways for other religious communities in Australia, and extend beyond just the legacies of sacred texts and their (mis)interpretation. There is a companion volume to this collection that begins an inter-religious dialogue at a theological and philosophical level, and both volumes have emerged substantially from a conference entitled ‘Ecological Aspects of War: Religious Perspectives from Australia’ held at Trinity College in Melbourne on 28 September 2015.<sup>2</sup> But the research project, the discussions and the practical engagement of the participants continues and deepens. We cannot afford for it not to do so.

In this book Australian biblical scholars engage with texts from Genesis to Revelation. With experience in the Earth Bible Project and the Ecological Hermeneutics section of the Society of Biblical Literature, contributors address impacts of war in more-than-human contexts and habitats, in conversation with selected biblical texts. Aspects of contemporary conflicts and the questions they pose for biblical studies are explored through cultural motifs such as the Rainbow Serpent of Australian Indigenous spiritualities, security and technological control, the loss of home, and ongoing colonial violence toward Indigenous people. Alongside these approaches, contributors ask: how do trees participate in war? how do we deal with the enemy? what after-texts of the biblical text speak into and

2. See A. Elvey, D. Guess and K. Dyer, eds., *Ecological Aspects of War: Religious and Theological Perspectives from Australia: A Forum for Theology in the World* 3, no. 2 (Adelaide: ATF, 2016).

from our contemporary world? David Horrell, leader of the University of Exeter's Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics project, responds to the collection, addressing the concept of *herem* in the Hebrew Bible, and drawing attention to the Pauline corpus. The volume asks: can creative readings of biblical texts contribute to the critical task of living together peaceably and sustainably?

In addressing these and related questions, the essays in this collection overlap and intersect in unexpected and surprising ways, and especially in relation to the underlying assumptions and legacies of our interpretive traditions and the context in which we now find ourselves. These connections, and the inevitable *lacunae* in the texts and issues tackled, are explored and exposed with precision and eloquence by Horrell. That was the brief given to him, and we are very appreciative of the rigour and insight he has brought to the task. Why should we go to someone in Britain – the place from which the colonizers set sail – to comment on our attempts to understand our postcolonial situation? That is a fair question, but we have long since moved beyond reactionary anti-colonial and anti-imperial rhetoric and embraced the truth that the settler-colonial context we inhabit, with all the hidden evils of the past, has shaped this ancient continent for good and for bad, for life and for death, and we must take account of it. It is no accident that the Earth Bible Project emerged in this complex context under the editorship of Norman Habel in South Australia, with an ear to Indigenous knowledges; and most of the contributors to this volume have been involved in the Earth Bible Project in one or more ways. Horrell offers another perspective, one we value as a collegial and sometimes critical counter-voice to our own multiple voices, a view from 'outside' or at least 'beyond'; we hesitate to say 'above'. Yet, there is a sense that we practice our own interpretations if not from the 'below' of the colonized then from 'within' the complexities of colonial history in Australia and the ongoing struggle to be accountable in relation to our situation here. In saying this, we begin already to use some of the perceptual insights of Carolyn Alsen's contribution, 'Drones Over Sodom: Resisting the Fantasy of Security'; so to this, and the other essays, we now turn.

Alsen re-views the Sodom and Gomorrah story of Gen. 18–19 in light of the increasing use of drones for surveillance and warfare in the Middle East today. The resulting analysis not only challenges the controlling imperial gaze from above – and its recurring iterations in the Persian period and every Empire since – but raises sharp questions about our own identification with the divine 'eye-in-the-sky' of the narrator of these events and the resulting judgement of Lot's wife (Ado) for looking back rather than up in her longing for security. Readers are invited to 'embrace