

Dianne Bergant. *A New Heaven, a New Earth: The Bible and Catholicity*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016. 200 pp. \$25.00 ISBN: 9781626981805.

Reviewed by John R. Barker, OFM  
Catholic Theological Union

This book seeks to address the tendency of humankind to see ourselves as separate from, rather than part of, the rest of the natural world. This perspective, according to Bergant, has led us to ascribe merely instrumental value to Earth and its various components, rather than see their intrinsic value apart from their usefulness for us. Such human blindness to the interconnectedness and interdependence of all elements of the cosmos has created problems both for humans and for other species, and for the Earth itself. At this critical moment, Bergant suggests, it “behooves us to correct our myopic perspective and focus anew on the oneness we share with the rest of Earth creatures, a oneness that already exists” (p. 5). To that end, Bergant—a biblical scholar—offers the reader what she calls an “experiment in hermeneutics,” an ecosensitive way of reading the Bible to discern what it has to offer in support of emerging ecotheologies. The lens through which Bergant examines key biblical passages and theological perspectives is a set of ecojustice principles from ecotheologian Norman Habel, principles that recognize the intrinsic worth, interconnectedness, and interdependence of the Earth and all its components. Such principles also call for resistance to manipulation and exploitation. This lens Bergant calls “the community of Earth.”

Bergant proceeds through the Christian Bible, selecting passages that feature some aspect of natural creation and examining them through the community of Earth lens. Chapter 1 looks at the Pentateuch, where Bergant finds several passages that show how dependent the personages and events recounted in those pages were on water, an observation that highlights both the intrinsic value of water and human dependence on it. In Chapter 2 she turns her attention to Joshua through 2 Kings, where the motif of land is particularly prominent. Key ideas that emerge here are that land is a fruitful, life-sustaining gift from God that humans are called to steward carefully, with full recognition that God, and not they, are sovereign “owners” of the land. Chapter 3 focuses on prophetic stories and oracles that highlight the human temptation toward greed and exploitation and the divine rejection of this disastrous attitude toward Earth and others. In Chapter 4 Bergant explores the biblical Wisdom tradition, which highlights the essential and divinely given order of creation, which humans must honor and live in accordance with in order to thrive. Of particular interest here is Bergant’s observation that the Wisdom tradition routinely draws its insights and lessons from the non-human world, which often models behaviors humans are called to emulate.

Turning to the New Testament, Bergant also notes in Chapter 5 that Jesus routinely used parables and images from the natural world to teach his disciples, further highlighting the principles of intrinsic value, interconnectedness, and interdependence. In Chapter 6 Pauline theology of the cosmic Christ and the redemption of all creation provides further support for these ecojustice principles. A notable feature of this chapter is Bergant’s extended and insightful exploration of the christological hymn in Col 1:15–20. Finally, in Chapter 7, Bergant finds in the book of Revelation’s promise of a new heaven and a new earth a hopeful message of the glorious cosmic transformation that emphasizes God’s love for all creation. Throughout the book Bergant finds ample support in the biblical witness for an ecojustice theology and ethic.

This book largely assumes that readers are at least familiar with the work of Habel and other ecotheologians and that they are already persuaded of the validity and importance of ecojustice principles. Readers who are not familiar with ecotheology, or who wish to explore it further before accepting all of its premises, will find a helpful bibliography at the end of the book.

Whether or not they have embraced ecotheology, all readers should find much to appreciate in this book. Although Bergant reads the biblical texts through a particular lens, her readings are not tendentious or implausible. She chooses central rather than peripheral texts and theological perspectives, which are quite representative of the biblical witness. Her discussion is always careful, informed, and insightful, and she finds many important, well-grounded implications for how humans ought to relate not only to God but also to their earthly home and to their fellow creatures.