

Article

An Ecolinguistic Reading of the Creation Story in the Bible: Beyond and Within

Cristina Pennarola 

Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche, Università di Napoli Federico II, Via Leopoldo Rodinò 22, 80138 Napoli, Italy; cpennaro@unina.it

Abstract: Taking the cue from the recent developments in ecotheology and its concern with a sustainable world where humans, animals and plants may live in harmony with each other, this paper sets out to investigate the representation of nature in the Bible's origin story. The creation in Genesis is analyzed according to Arran Stibbe's ecolinguistic framework and "the stories we live by". The tools used (narratives, evaluations, frames, metaphors, erasure and ideologies) have illuminated an outstandingly popular story and highlighted its potential for meaning in the tension between contrasting worldviews: dominion vs. stewardship; innocence vs. knowledge; theocentrism vs. anthropocentrism. The analysis of narrative and linguistic elements suggests that the world beyond—represented by God, the heavens, the sky—coincides with the order within the whole of creation. The origin story proves deeply ambivalent as it features humans in two antithetical roles depending on the story's timeline: first as guardians of the created world and then as outcasts full of shame. Going against God's command is framed as an act of self-betrayal that breaks the unbreakable bond between humans and God, and subverts the perfect harmony of human society within the natural world.

Keywords: Bible; discourse analysis; ecotheology; English translation; nature; origin story; theolinguistics



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1. Introduction

The momentous changes in the world climate and ecosystems and the consequent call for sustainable policies have involved all levels of civil society, from governments to individual citizens, in an integrated effort on the part of scientists, environmentalists, economists, politicians and religious representatives. In 1990, scientists meeting at the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders Conference in Moscow made a strong plea for the synergy between religion and science in the safeguarding of the environment:

The historical record makes clear that religious teaching, example and leadership are powerfully able to influence personal conduct and commitment. As scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred. At the same time, a much wider and deeper understanding of science and technology is needed. If we do not understand the problem, it is unlikely we will be able to fix it. Thus, there is a vital role for religion and science. (*Forum on Religion and Ecology* 1990, p. 1)

It seems noteworthy that the environmental movement, generally associated with political activism and scientific empiricism, has welcomed contributions from clergy and religious organizations. The attention placed on religion by academics and politicians may appear surprising in the general agnostic climate of our secular societies (*Moberg et al.* 2012), but it takes into account the crucial role played by world religions "as key repositories of enduring civilizational values and as indispensable motivators in moral transformation"

(Tucker and Grim 2001, p. 4). As highlighted in a wealth of official documents and scholarly articles (Clingerman and O'Brien 2014; Hoffman 2015; Taylor 2004 among many), religions can effectively contribute to promoting environmentally responsible behaviors on the basis of the leading principles of the sacredness of life and the human quest for the highest good.

The intertwining of religion and environmentalism has given rise to international organizations (for example, the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture and the Earth Bible Project)¹ and has also led to new interdisciplinary frameworks and areas of study subsumed under the label of ecotheology (Gottlieb 2006; Marlow and Harris 2022; Troster 2013). Religious attitudes towards nature and life are not necessarily enshrined in official systems of belief, especially considering the rising trends towards post-secular spiritualities and what has been labelled as “dark green religion”, i.e., “understandings of ecological interdependence and experiences of awe, wonder, belonging, and connection in and through explorations of nature” (Taylor et al. 2016, p. 340). Whatever the principles and world visions posited by religions, their impact on environmental-sensitive behaviors appears to be a highly crucial field of study in our endangered ecosystems (Pattemore 2019; Taylor et al. 2016).

Taking the cue from these recent developments in ecotheology and the growing concern with a sustainable world where human beings, animals and plants may live in harmony with each other, this paper sets out to investigate the representation of nature in the Bible's origin story, placing particular attention on agency and the way in which the characters behave towards each other and the land with its wide variety of habitats and creatures. While the story of Adam and Eve has attracted scholarly attention as well as popular media interest, and also originated serious reflection on its possible ecological undertones, its meanings appear to be deeply elusive, inextricably interwoven with questions of faith, doctrine and ideology. For Christians, it is known as the story of the fall showing humans' fatal disobedience to God and their consequent exile from Paradise; for non-Christians, it may represent one more mythical account of the origins, simplifying the laws of the universe and staging the powerful forces that influence human actions. At a deeper level, it has also raised questions about order, hierarchy, sexuality and gender equality (Clines 1990; Stratton 1995).

As stated by Gunn and Fewell (1993, p. XI) in their breathtaking account of biblical narratives, “Meaning is not something out there in the text waiting to be discovered. Meaning is always, in the last analysis, the reader's creation, and readers, like texts, come in an infinite variety. No amount of learning to read biblical narrative ‘correctly’ will lead inexorably through the ‘given’ poetics of the text to the ‘correct’ interpretation”. As proved by their well-documented and multifaceted analysis, holy scriptures and sacred books come to signify in the same complex and problematic way as any other text with far fewer claims to establishing the last and ultimate truth. Thus, my point in re-examining the creation story in the Bible after many scholars have done the same is to explore its meanings in the contemporary world according to an ecolinguistic lens, possibly detached from religious assumptions and theological interpretations.

This paper develops around the following themes: the role of religion and Christianity in the environmental crisis and the nature of agency in Biblical creation. In particular, I set out to examine the origin story in terms of actions and responsibilities: who does what to whom and with what effect. After outlining the connections between religion and environmentalism, I summarize the two leading paradigms within Christian ecotheology, dominion and stewardship, and argue that, contrary to current perceptions, they are interrelated: just like humans' control of the created world is for taking good care of the environment, so dominion and stewardship are superseded historical constructs that need to give way, in the contemporary environmental crisis, to a more equal and supportive relationship between humans and all living beings. I then proceed to illustrate the analytical tools adopted in Stibbe's ecolinguistic framework which I applied to the creation story in the Bible. In the analysis and discussion, I draw attention to several narrative and linguistic elements: the commonality between God and humans in the beginning; God's speech acts

and his agency reverberating across the creation as all the creatures are encouraged to grow and multiply; the dynamic representation of living creatures and natural phenomena as doers; the elusive nature of knowledge and its ambivalent value as a corrupting or liberating force; Adam's and Eve's sudden shame at their quite natural nakedness; God's clothing them and then banishing them from Eden. The analysis of the origin story is integrated with an overview of the natural-world metaphors across the Bible and how the cycle of life and natural phenomena mirror human affairs in times of famine and days of plenty. In place of a theocentric or anthropocentric orientation underlying God's creation, I argue that the creation story revolves around self-perpetuating births, an abundance of all kinds and 'good things' that can manage their own stories independently of their creator, even when they go against his command.

Literature Review

The many initiatives that have taken place from the second half of the twentieth century up to the first decades of the new millennium have celebrated the awe-inspiring beauty of nature together with its heartrending fragility and have sought new ecological paradigms that can make our current lifestyles possible and sustainable at the same time. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), founded in 1972 as the outcome of the UN conference on the Environment in Stockholm, has steadily monitored the world's habitats and sought viable solutions to environmental challenges, combining a wide range of approaches, including faith-based initiatives.²

However, not everybody agrees that religion can only have a positive impact on the environment, and some have argued just the opposite. In his seminal paper on "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", Lynn White (1967, p. 1205) stated that "Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion", and then argued that the Christian Church's emphasis on the dominant role of man in creation, apparently established by God in Genesis, had made technological and scientific progress the ultimate aim of all human endeavors, encouraged an exploitative attitude towards the earth and its resources, and spoiled the harmonious relationship between man and nature that had characterized the first centuries of Western civilization up to the Middle Ages. In particular, White's argumentation is based on the account of creation (Genesis 1: 28) where God tells his creatures, the man and the woman: "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and *subdue* it. *Have dominion* over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth"³ (my italics). This provocative theory that blames man's ecological failure on the Judeo-Christian tradition has fueled an endless debate among scholars who partially agreed and those who refuted it, pointing to the misleading translations of the Hebrew verbs *kabash* and *rada*, respectively, translated into 'subdue' and 'have dominion' even though they may refer to responsible government in the first chapter of Genesis.⁴

As pointed out by Kay (1989), the dichotomy between dominion and stewardship is a way of simplifying religious beliefs and the very view of nature presented in the Bible; it needs first to be related to the whole of the Bible, i.e., the variegated fabric of stories, chronicles, poems, proverbs, wise sayings and prophecies approximately ranging from the first millennium before Christ to the first two centuries of the Christian era; secondly, it must be examined in its multiple and evolving socio-historical contexts, also taking into account the variability of translations and their possible effect on exegesis. Recent approaches to the Bible have the merit of acknowledging the readers' positioning in terms of their knowledge, skills, presuppositions, feelings and expectations and they also reveal the fascinating complexity of the multiple discourse worlds that have shaped the meanings of biblical stories over the centuries and across their diverse readerships (Vermeulen and Hayes 2022).

In 2015, Pope Francis issued the encyclical letter *Laudato Si' - On Care for Our Common Home*, in which he emphasized the responsibility that human beings must take for the other living creatures and the planet we all inhabit. Starting from the controversial interpretation

of Genesis first two chapters, he clarified that human dominion over the earth must be intended as a mutual relation of subsistence and subservience:

The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to “till and keep” the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2: 15). “Tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. (Pope Francis 2015, p. 49)

In the face of the public’s mounting preoccupation with climate change and environmental disasters, this timely encyclical was particularly welcomed by some politicians and academics for its potential to drive the change in people’s mindsets and behaviors and also promote ecofriendly policies (Labrecque 2022; Tucker and Grim 2016). According to Pope Francis’ sensitive reframing of these opposite concepts, dominion and stewardship are closely interrelated and mutually beneficial: a form of human control meant for the care of the earth and all its creatures, including humans. Much in the same direction, the principle of mutual custodianship set out by the Earth Bible Project establishes that “Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners, rather than rulers, to sustain a balanced and diverse Earth community” (Habel and Wurst 2000, p. 20; also see Earth Bible Team 2000, p. 27).

2. Theoretical Framework

This analysis of aspects of creation in the Bible draws on Arran Stibbe’s ecolinguistic framework and the stories we live by (Stibbe 2021). As century-old story-telling traditions have made universally known, stories are the most powerful tool to orientate human lives and make sense of a vast array of complicated, deeply baffling and often disappointing situations happening all the time and to each person living on this planet. Especially in times of trouble or in the presence of a problem resulting in conflicting views and controversial solutions, a good story is worth more than a thousand aphorisms and pieces of wisdom; it is also so much more captivating and reassuring than logical argumentation. This is the reason why they are so pervasive and ubiquitous at all times and in every society; whatever their purpose—entertainment or persuasion, aesthetic enjoyment or philosophical inquiry, profit or healing—they provide us with an engaging explanation and a rationale for the chaos and inconsistencies flawing human life.

In Arran Stibbe’s ecolinguistic framework, stories are “mental models which influence behaviour and lie at the heart of the ecological challenges we are facing” (Stibbe 2021, p. 1). Interestingly, according to this definition, stories may remain hidden between the lines of a text and yet exercise a great influence over people unaware of their subtle power. For example, the story of Adam’s and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden may suggest that our current home is a squalid place doomed to decay and forever separate from the perfect beauty of our blissful origins.

In addition to the concept of stories as mental models hidden in popular texts and influencing our decisions, Stibbe’s ecolinguistic analysis also looks at actual stories and narratives as travelling routes that take us across countries, societies, traditions, cultures, ideologies and ecosophies, i.e., views of our place in the natural world. The concept of a story is so pervasive in Stibbe’s framework that all the tools examined at length in his *Ecolinguistics* (2021) are considered “types of story” (Stibbe 2021, p. 19), from ideologies to convictions, from identity to erasure. The sense-making power of stories can best be seen at work whenever human events and states of affair seem to be too complex and baffling to be fully comprehended: for example, when the extraordinary technological progress marking modern industrial society turns out to threaten or even damage the entire planet earth and its inhabitants, including ourselves. In the face of such a dramatic turn of events, from technological comfort to ecological disaster, stories either as mental models or as gripping

narratives can provide an explanation and hopefully a way forward to a more harmonious interaction between nature and society.

Just as the problematic relationship between the natural world and man-made creations or artifacts (from time-saving machines to symbolic commodities) calls for stories, so does the quest for a reality beyond the one normally experienced by humans. All religions tell a different story about God, the reason why the world with all its creatures exists and what happens to human beings after their death. These stories respond to our deepest existential questions about our identity, direction in life and sense of worth, and they can also relieve our anxiety over our final destination after our life on earth comes to an end.⁵ Ecolinguistic tools can then prove very suitable to the analysis of Bible stories that deal with the wonders of creation as well as with the messy relationship between humans and nature. In particular, the tools below illustrated in Stibbe's study can yield fresh insights into biblical texts worn out by often routinized liturgical readings:

NARRATIVES: sequences of events logically or temporally connected, and their entailments, or "morals of the story". For example, creation stories in several religions assign different roles to mankind and animals with possible repercussions on human behaviors (Stibbe 2021, pp. 191–96).

EVALUATIONS: forms of assessment of an area of life, whether positive or negative. For example, the theocentric or anthropocentric orientation underlying human stories in the Bible is implicitly evaluated thanks to narrative and linguistic cues: whether God creator is the lord and master of the whole world—as shown in the Bible's creation story—or humans are the masters of their own decisions as in the forbidden fruit story, the evaluation can be positive, negative or ambivalent depending on the interpreter's viewpoint and ideological stance.

FRAMES: ideas about an area of life that are applied to a different area of life. For example, infringing God's command in Genesis 2–3 has been framed as an act of disobedience and a rebellion but also as a parable about "the human maturation process" and Adam's and Eve's entrance into adulthood thanks to the discovery of their naked bodies and sexuality (van Wolde 1997, p. 61).

METAPHORS: different concepts are presented as equivalent on the basis of a common characteristic. For instance, the rib taken from Adam to create Eve is a small but significant part of Adam's body and can be regarded as a metaphor for the soul of human beings: innermost, life-giving and also unexpectedly solid. Likewise, the forbidden fruit, innocently presented as a shortcut to wisdom, represents knowledge and its ambivalent nature, liberating or corrupting.

ERASURE: deliberate omission of elements considered unworthy of attention or, possibly, too problematic to be included in the story. For example, why did God create everything, from the light to the sky and the whole world with its huge variety of places, vegetation, animals and human beings? The Babylonian myth known as Enuma Elish, which has been compared to the Hebrew creation story and other *ex nihilo* origin stories (Hayes 2012; Smith 2010), shows intricate plots where the gods or heroes act out of spite, greed, jealousy, revenge and lust, but the reasons why the world has been created are hardly ever mentioned and remain unclear (Leeming 2010).

IDEOLOGIES: belief systems or worldviews shared by a group of people and orienting their practices and behaviors. It is worth noting that ideologies cannot be evaluated on their truth value or their positive or negative contribution to society as they have a purely cognitive content, which makes them deeply subjective (Stibbe 2021, pp. 21–22). "Greenspeak" or the set of varied ecological discourses and the good practices that should be implemented to protect the environment is an example of ideology (Stibbe 2021, p. 25). Green religion, i.e., the blend of environmentalism and spirituality prompting people to care for their surroundings, is another form of ideology, which is currently being investigated from diverse perspectives (Taylor 2016; Taylor et al. 2016, p. 340).

3. Materials and Method

Given the vast array of historically driven investigations of the Bible that seek to track all its intricate layers of meanings, my aim is to examine the implications of the biblical creation for readers more concerned about the environment and the current crisis than about the Christian creed and life after death. As a linguist and a Christian familiar with liturgy and doctrine, I think that an ecolinguistic approach can provide interesting insights into aspects of the relationship between humans and the natural world in Genesis, regardless of the theological frameworks, either Jewish or Christian, which can often be perceived as dogmatic, imposing and outdated, no more relevant today than they were centuries ago.⁶ Since the creation story in Genesis is also examined by Arran Stibbe as one of the stories that can affect the way humans relate to the environment (Stibbe 2021, pp. 191–95), I wonder whether it is possible to reach a different conclusion and problematize the apparent superiority of humankind established in Genesis. In particular, I wish to answer the following research questions:

- What kind of interaction occurs between human beings, God and the earth before and after the man and the woman have eaten the forbidden fruit?
- What does the forbidden fruit stand for and why does eating it cast such a gloomy shadow on humankind?
- How do the stories of creation in Genesis relate to the current environmental problems and how can they be perceived: beneficial, destructive or ambivalent?

A difficulty in this study concerns the original languages of the Bible (Hebrew and occasionally Aramaic in the Old Testament; Greek in the New Testament) and my use of one particular translation in English, *The New American Bible* (NAB) (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002), among many possible choices. The reason why all the biblical quotations in this paper come from the NAB is that this version, available on the Vatican's website, allows for the retrieval of word frequencies and concordances thanks to the hypertextual system *Èulogos IntraText* (https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_INDEX.HTM, accessed on 5 May 2023). It is common knowledge that the layers of text meaning are not based only on content but also on the form of the text; the language choices in terms of sounds, vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric greatly contribute to meaning, whatever the text complexity and popularity. Reading and interpreting the Bible in English (and in one of its many available translations) is not the same as reading and interpreting it in the original languages⁷. Precisely this consideration reinforces the case for a non-theological reading of the creation in the Bible to examine its significance for lay English readers of the twenty-first century in light of the current concern for environmental issues.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1. The Stories of Creation

The primeval world appears out of nothingness thanks to God's initiative, as in the memorable start below⁸:

(1) In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light", and there was light. God saw how good the light was. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day', and the darkness he called 'night'. Thus evening came, and morning followed—the first day. (Genesis 1: 1–5).

A surprising lack of splendor characterizes this act of creation with the presentation of a formless wasteland surrounded by darkness and marked by the abyss. Not only do the words used to describe the origins of the world present negative connotations (e.g., *formless, wasteland, darkness, abyss*), but they also suggest that the newly made world lacks shape, vitality, color and matter: in short, all that is needed for life to start and unfold. In contrast to this grim start, the images that follow—the mighty wind and the appearance of

light—bring the story back to a climactic development in line with other myths of creation featuring a skillful god, *Deus Faber* (von Franz 2017). The creation of light entirely renovates the world, which no longer lies in darkness, and also introduces time with the alternation of night and day. It seems worth noting that the light called “day” by God on the first day of creation is distinct from the sun, the moon and the stars that are created on the fourth day “to mark the fixed times, the days and the years, and serve as luminaries in the dome of the sky...to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1: 14–15; 18). Everything serves a purpose and at the same time reflects an overwhelming sense of beauty: the abundance and variety of the living creatures populating the water, the sky and the earth, each at peace with the other species, is an unforgettable vision of absolute bliss. The creation unfolds according to a regular pattern as everything and every living being is created in its own time according to a six-day timetable culminating in the seventh day dedicated to God’s rest:

Day 1: light;

Day 2: the sky;

Day 3: the sea, vegetation;

Day 4: the stars and “the two great lights to govern the day and the night”;

Day 5: sea monsters, swimming creatures, winged birds;

Day 6: wild animals, cattle, creeping things, the man and the woman.

Day 7: God’s rest.

Everything is created by the action of God: as on the first day, light comes into being by God’s saying, “Let there be light”, so on the days that follow, things and creatures are created just by being mentioned:

(2) Then God said, “Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures, and on the earth let birds fly beneath the dome of the sky”. And so it happened: God created the great sea monsters and all kinds of swimming creatures with which the water teems, and all kinds of winged birds. God saw how good it was, and God blessed them, saying, “Be fertile, multiply, and fill the water of the seas; and let the birds multiply on the earth”. (Genesis 1: 20–22)

God’s appreciation concludes his working day: “God saw how good it was. Evening came, and morning followed” (Genesis 1: 12–13; 18–19). Here, as elsewhere in the Bible, God’s action is followed by his (self)-evaluation; the sequence of verbs *created*, *said*, *called*, *saw*, *blessed*, etc., shows the unequivocal agency of God but also his way of sharing agency with animate and inanimate things. God’s blessing on the creatures is an invitation to fertility and abundance; his repeated formula “let X do ...” (“Let the earth bring forth vegetation”; “Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures”; “Let the earth bring forth all kinds of living creatures”) sounds like a warm encouragement for the earth and the water to do what is already in their nature: grow vegetation and feed creatures. Although God is the creator of all things, it is clear from his blessing that his creative power is shared with his creatures and reverberates across the earth, the water and the sky as each space accommodates living creatures in their great variety of appearance and subsistence. The attention placed on the earth in Genesis 1: 1–2:3 seems noteworthy, especially when contrasted with the emphasis that modern Western readers and biblical scholarship have given to the spiritual realm⁹ (Hiebert 2019). The narrative focus on the earth testifies to the creative power of God as well as his involvement with the material world and all its living beings: far from revealing himself as a transcendental God “locked in the celestial sphere” (Armstrong 1996, p. 13), he shows how deeply he cares for the created world, i.e., nature and humankind.

On the sixth day, God’s appreciation is thoroughly positive as he looks back on the whole of creation: “God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day” (Genesis 1: 31). This comprehensive appreciation of all the things created is all the more notable as it encompasses the man and the woman:

(3) God made all kinds of wild animals, all kinds of cattle, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. God saw how good it was. Then God said: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground”. God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth”. (Genesis 1: 25–28)

A positive assessment marks the creation of light, the earth, the sea, the plants and fruit trees, the sun, the moon and stars, and all kinds of animals, while it is surprisingly missing in the creation of the heavens, the sky and mankind. Given the formulaic nature of the creation story with its insistence on God’s agency and its good outcomes, this erasure seems worth investigating. What do the heavens, the sky and humans have in common that may set them apart from the rest of creation?

If we focus our attention on the heavens and the sky, it is clear that their referential meanings overlap to a large extent: though the meaning of “sky” pertains to the natural sciences and weather phenomena, both “heavens” and “sky” can refer to a superior realm regarded, especially in ancient times, as God’s abode (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2023).¹⁰ The word “sky” has often assumed the meaning of a metaphysical space because of the cognitive frames shaping human thinking; in particular, the metaphorical pattern that associates God with an upward orientation (e.g., “a higher power”, “the world above the one we know”) can help us understand how the sky and the heaven/heavens are often considered the chosen home of the spirit and God’s dwelling place.

“God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1: 27). Insofar as human beings are created in God’s image,¹¹ their closeness to God is a trait in common with the heavens and the sky, and it is this trait that singles them out and makes comments superfluous. After all, when speaking of himself, God says, “I am who am” (Exodus 3: 14), which is a hermetic self-reference that has been interpreted in many different ways, one of which points to the absolute essence of God and his being beyond words and human description (see also *Kearney* 2002). The positive comments made by God on his creation cannot refer to God’s image and likeness—mankind.

After the creation of the male and the female, and after “the heavens and the earth and all their array were completed” (Genesis 2: 1), God made the seventh day holy “because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation” (Genesis 2: 3). God’s act of dedicating a day for rest after many days of work is significant as it establishes a necessary alternation between work and rest and also conveys the principle that creation cannot be an everlasting process but needs regular breaks, in line with the eco-friendly rejection of “growthism”, i.e., “unlimited economic growth” (*Stibbe* 2021, p. 85).

A little while after his rest, though, God resumes his work¹²:

(4) The LORD God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being. Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and he placed there the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made various trees grow that were delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. (Genesis 2: 7–9)

In this version of the origins, the man is made of clay and God’s breath, while the woman is formed out of a man’s rib to become his equal companion:

(5) The LORD God then built up into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man. When he brought her to the man, the man said: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called ‘woman’, for out of ‘her man’ this one has been taken”.

Both accounts of the creation appear to be very simple with an orderly sequence of events, extolling the role of God as creator and the goodness of his creation (Habel 2000). In the first account, the man and the woman come last as the pinnacle of creation, while in the second account, God creates the man soon after the heavens and the earth. The second version differs from the previous one on a number of accounts:

- Trees and animals are created after the man to give him companionship;
- The woman is created at the very end of creation from the man's rib to be "his suitable partner";
- The man rejoices verbally at the woman's appearance as he recognizes her as his own kind;
- There is no mention of the creation of light, the sky, the luminaries;
- The geography of the land inhabited by humans, the Garden of Eden, is precise and realistic with some well-known toponyms such as tigris and euphrates, the two rivers crossing Eden.

The fact that the creation in Genesis has two different accounts seems remarkable, but this is by no means the only duplicate story in the Bible which, indeed, abounds in repeated and sometimes contradictory information (Stefani 2017). Although the Bible's duplicate stories can stem from the oral transmission of those ancient texts that were put into writing only at a later stage, the juxtaposition of two versions of the same story, only differing in some details or viewpoints adopted, seems the key to a more complex interpretation of the Bible compared to its currently popular image—"that of a whitewashed text which inculcates morality, conserves social order and teaches love and tolerance, by employing images of disintegration, dirt and contagion as well as by constructing a figure of a fervent believer in the Bible and its ideas" (Rychter 2018, p. 1). Far from entrusting humans with monolithic, one-sided accounts of events, the Bible includes several accounts of the same story, and, in so doing, rather than transmitting the one and ultimate truth, it foregrounds the multifaceted nature of the stories told from different perspectives and suggests competing worldviews. As pointed out by Hayes (2012, pp. 25–26), "The Bible makes its readers work [...] It explores moral issues and situations; it places its characters in moral dilemmas—but very often the reader must draw the conclusions [...] and] allow the text to mean what it says, when what it says flies in the face of centuries of theological construction of the concept 'God'".

4.2. *The Story of the Forbidden Fruit*

The story of how the only true command issued by God becomes infringed by the woman and the man makes one of the most poignant stories and topoi in world literature:

(6) Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals that the LORD God had made. The serpent asked the woman, "Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?"

The woman answered the serpent: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die'.

But the serpent said to the woman: "You certainly will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad". The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. (Genesis 3: 1–7)

An echo of this narrative can be traced in Greek myths, medieval romances and modern dramas where the quest for knowledge threatens not just the life but even the soul of man, as in the gripping story of Dr. Faustus, who is ready to strike a deal with the devil in order to attain absolute knowledge. The human thirst for knowledge is often presented as arrogance and a ridiculous emulation of God (or the Gods); in this biblical excerpt, however, eating the fruit from the forbidden tree is presented as a pleasure and a way to gain wisdom, rather than as an open challenge to God's authority. It may be interesting to note how the woman is aware of God's prohibition even though it had been issued in Genesis 2: 17 before she had made her appearance, which may suggest the deep union between the man and the woman, and their sharing of information and experience.

Is the knowledge of good and bad disgraceful, the root of all evil, which has thrown humans out of the Garden of Eden and into a perpetual state of toil and pain? In order to answer this question, it feels necessary to examine the story and what the characters say and do. God forbids man and woman to eat the fruit because "the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die" (Genesis 2: 17). The serpent calls into question the truthfulness of God's word and cunningly suggests that God has forbidden the fruit lest the man and the woman, acquiring knowledge, become like him, gods. Yet, in the end, how does the knowledge of good and bad manifest itself after the man and his wife have eaten the fruit? By the sudden realization that they are naked. In place of the secrets of the universe, humans are struck by a rather trivial piece of self-awareness, their own nakedness, and their sudden shame offers a stark contrast with their original purity: "The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame". (Genesis 2: 25).

We can interpret this story as the loss of childlike innocence and the rite of passage into adulthood with its burden of deception and betrayal, for indeed the serpent has deceived the man and the woman by selling them a fake Godlike wisdom, and the man and the woman have betrayed God, trusting a serpent rather than their own creator, whose image and likeness is their very own. A further question begs to be asked: is there anything inherently bad in nakedness, since the first manifestation of the knowledge of good and bad is precisely the knowledge of being naked. As we very well know and yet tend to forget, being naked is our natural state, whereas being dressed is the visible sign of our civilized and social self. The feeling of shame experienced by the man and the woman at the knowledge of their nakedness points to the ambivalence of any human story, after the unity with God has been broken: anything is good in itself and in God's all-knowing vision; anything feels bad when human beings distrust God and their godlike nature and trust the serpent instead. Moreover, the shame at one's nakedness, i.e., one's natural state, signals that also the feeling of unity between human beings and the natural world has been disrupted.

The ominous doom of death that God had warned the man against occurs not immediately: first, the serpent is cursed into walking on his belly and eating dirt; then, the woman is stuck with painful childbearing and submission to her husband; thirdly, the man is condemned to find food through endless toil and, by the end of his days, return to the ground for his burial. Finally, before banishing the man and the woman from the Garden of Eden, God makes leather garments to clothe them¹³ and says they must be kept away from the tree of life, which would make them immortal:

(7) For the man and his wife the LORD God made leather garments, with which he clothed them. Then the LORD God said: "See! The man has become like one of us, knowing what is good and what is bad! Therefore, he must not be allowed to put out his hand to take fruit from the tree of life also, and thus eat of it and live forever". (Genesis 3: 22–23)

Thus, even though the promised deaths in Genesis 2: 17 do not occur, God condemns the human creatures to become mortal by withdrawing the fruit from the tree of life. From this discomfiting epilogue, we are made to understand several important points of the story:

1. God cares for the man and the woman even after they have betrayed his trust;
2. The knowledge of good and bad which has made man become like god does not manifest itself as superior power or greater discernment; rather, it entails self- and mutual distrust;
3. When human beings become like god, they lose their many privileges (harmony, self-content, immortality) and gain instead a burden of pain and toil.

Stories can be interpreted in many different and even mutually contradictory ways, especially if no omniscient narrator is taking charge and says who is the good one and what the characters in the story are up to. The story of the human infringement is no exception as we only know what happens and what the characters say: no convenient commentary helps us go beyond the events of the story to their deep meanings and to its moral. Although we know quite a lot about God's actions and thinking, we do not know his "motives and goals" and we are left wondering (Stratton 1995, p. 66). The most common interpretation dating back to Paul's letter to the Romans (5: 12–14) is God's punishment for human trespassing. The punishment is indeed executed by God who says:

(8) "I will intensify the pangs of your childbearing; in pain shall you bring forth children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall be your master." To the man he said: "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat, "Cursed be the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you, as you eat of the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; For you are dirt, and to dirt you shall return". (Genesis 3: 16–19)

Thus, one of the story entailments could be: "Stick to God's command unless you are looking for trouble and willing to obtain free will and independence through a lifetime of toil, pain and death at the end".¹⁴ Yet, even before God's intervention, the outcome of human trespassing is made visible in man's and woman's fear of God and their hiding from him. The natural order of creation where everything is good and where man, as God's very image and likeness, is entrusted with looking after the other creatures has been replaced by a new order of things where human beings have acquired the knowledge of good and bad, and, because of this, lost touch with their creator and the rest of creation. The role played by human beings has evolved dramatically from guardians and rulers of the created world into creatures ashamed of their own nakedness and fearful of their creator. As they leave the Garden of Eden in sorrow, we are left to wonder to what extent they still bear the image and likeness of God and make God present in their God-imposed exile.

4.3. A View of Nature in the Bible

The Hebrew Bible has no equivalent for the English word "nature", meaning "The phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations" (Soanes and Stevenson 2003, p. 1172). Far from indicating a lack of knowledge of nature in its wide variety of referents, the absence of the word "nature" from the Hebrew vocabulary points to an empiric way of conceptualizing the natural world and nominating its single parts based on sensorial experience. As pointed out by several scholars, the natural world depicted in the Bible is concrete and specific (Baker 1990; Marlow and Harris 2022); in place of nature as a general entity, it is its single parts that are nominated and described:¹⁵ the water, the dry land, the sky, the plants, the fruit trees, the flowers, the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, all the wild animals and the creatures that crawl on the ground. Throughout the Bible, in fact, it is made clear that all living beings and natural phenomena are made by God. In the first chapters in Genesis, the Lord is the subject of material action verbs—*God created, God made, God set, the LORD God placed, the LORD God formed*, etc.—and of some verbs of saying (*said, called, blessed*), which show a warm dialogic interaction between God and his creatures. Agency is not exclusive to God and is distributed among

the other characters thanks to God's blessing and the encouragement to multiply and fill the water and the earth (also see example 2):

(9) Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth all kinds of living creatures: cattle, creeping things, and wild animals of all kinds". (Genesis 1: 24)

Living creatures are not the only ones to take action; also inanimate things act in line with their assigned duties: "evening came"; "morning followed"; "the earth brought forth every kind of plant"; "luminaries (...) shed light upon the earth"; "a stream was welling up out of the earth and was watering all the surface of the ground"; "a river rises in Eden to water the garden". The existence of each creature can be regarded as a song of praise and exultation to God:

(10) Hallelujah! Praise the LORD from the heavens; give praise in the heights./ Praise him, all you angels; give praise, all you hosts./Praise him, sun and moon; give praise, all shining stars./Praise him, highest heavens, you waters above the heavens./Let them all praise the LORD'S name; for the LORD commanded and they were created,/Assigned them duties forever, gave them tasks that will never change./Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deep waters;/You lightning and hail, snow and clouds, storm winds that fulfill his command;/You mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars;/You animals wild and tame, you creatures that crawl and fly;/You kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all who govern on earth;/Young men and women too, old and young alike. (Psalm 148: 1–13)

The passionate invocation in Psalm 148 addressing angels and humans, the sun, moon and stars, waters, clouds, winds, lightning, snow, mountains, trees and all kinds of animals shows that all beings and things created have personal characteristics: they can be directly addressed as any human being ("you"); they have feelings of praise and exultation ("Hallelujah! Praise the LORD"); they perform their duties ("the LORD ... Assigned them duties forever").¹⁶ Another interesting feature is that, whatever their role, task, power and intelligence, creatures and natural phenomena have agency, i.e., they do things of their own will or because of God's command. While the modern concept of nature is related to the scientific domain, creation is a religious concept and one that imbues creatures and natural phenomena with the spiritual life of their creator. This animistic element permeates the natural world of the Bible: as flourishing when it is in unison with God, as arid and forlorn when the people in charge stray from the path of righteousness and by their malicious conduct spoil the harvest: "The vine has dried up, the fig tree is withered;/ The pomegranate, the date palm also, and the apple, all the trees of the field are dried up;/ Yes, joy has withered away from among mankind" (Joel 1: 12).

Moreover, the metaphorical image of the tree of the knowledge of good and bad emphasizes the intimate relationship between humans and the natural world: knowledge is represented as a tree, a growing organism that goes through seasonal changes, and is liable to decay and death; the fruit, "good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom" (Genesis 3: 6), is a kind of food that must be eaten to take effect. Quite ironically, it is precisely the fruit of the tree of knowledge that disrupts the union between humans, God and the natural world. As in one of Jesus' parables, the fruit stands for either good or bad:

(11) "Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Just so, every good tree bears good fruit, and a rotten tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree bear good fruit." (Matthew 7: 16–18)

The same fruit metaphor in Genesis and the Gospel is used to point to two essential dimensions in human life, cognitive and ethical; it also suggests that the knowledge and action of humans can be viewed in terms of trees/fruits, and the natural world is not distinct from the human world.

5. Discussion

The story of creation in Genesis is very popular, even outside the boundaries of Christian faith: it has been endlessly interpreted and adapted to fit different media and to suit different audiences across ages. Even those who are not familiar with the Bible are aware of the tragic story of Adam and Eve and how the fruit taken off the tree of the knowledge of good and bad (generally represented by an apple) has disrupted the world created by God and proved fatal to both of them and their offspring. Because of its narrative ingredients—God, a talking snake, a beautiful garden where the mysterious and forbidden tree stands—this story can be framed as a myth, which uses the marvelous element and allegorical imagery to explain the origins of evil in the world we have come to know: why we experience physical pain and endless toil throughout our lives, and finally death at the end. Moreover, and much more subtly, this myth recounts the break-up between the man and the woman: how the man accuses his only partner and companion in order to minimize his own fault in front of God. In turn, the woman accuses the serpent of tricking her into tasting the fruit. Yet, what the man and the woman fail to realize when they make their feeble excuses is their own betrayal: they both trusted an unknown creature more than their own creator and believed that God's reason for keeping them away from that tree was jealousy of the godlike knowledge they would supposedly achieve.

The characters can be interpreted as symbols, standing for some more general truth: the serpent for treachery; the tree for knowledge; God for the law. The man and the woman in this story stand for all human beings across time and societies, who wish to know all there is to know. In sum, this story tells us some very interesting facts about knowledge:

1. The tree of knowledge, at the center of the beautiful Garden of Eden and next to the tree of life, has a dominant position in man's dwelling place and life;
2. Knowledge is forbidden to men and women;
3. By gaining knowledge, men and women will also know their death;
4. Men and women do not delight in their newly acquired knowledge;
5. Knowledge brings them a feeling of shame, fear and mutual distrust even before God's condemnation.

From this brief illustration, knowledge may appear to be a threat rather than an asset. However, the Bible says quite the opposite:

(12) By wisdom is a house built, by understanding is it made firm;

And by knowledge are its rooms filled with every precious and pleasing possession.

A wise man is more powerful than a strong man, and a man of knowledge than a man of might;

For it is by wise guidance that you wage your war, and the victory is due to a wealth of counselors. (Proverbs 24: 3–6)

Throughout the Bible, knowledge is presented as something good and also necessary, often bestowed as a gift to ordinary people by omniscient God. Yet, knowledge has a dual side since the things to be known are both good and bad. In a world that was created good from nothingness, the knowledge of the bad spoils that original purity: even nakedness—neither good nor bad in itself—becomes tainted with shame after knowledge enters the man and the woman through the forbidden fruit. For those who have read the Bible's subsequent chapters and books, the heavy burden of knowledge on mankind is dramatically conveyed through the wild scenes of slaughter and destruction in contrast to the perfect union between the man and the woman and the idyllic coexistence of humans and animals in the Garden of Eden.

Eating the forbidden fruit has generally been framed as an act of disobedience against God (or the law of the universe), precipitating humanity in a world endlessly painful and laborious. Yet, in a more intimate reading of the Garden of Eden break-up, eating the forbidden fruit can be framed as an act of self-betrayal that breaks the unbreakable bond between humans and their creator, and consequently disrupts the perfect harmony of

human society within the natural world. In the latter case, the world beyond—represented by the heavens, the sky, God—is one with the whole of creation, including human creatures. Several narrative and linguistic elements make a strong case for this second reading: God’s creation of the man and the woman in his image and his entrusting them with the care of the other creatures; the human creatures’ sense of agency also shown through their words and dialogue with God (Pennarola 2020); the shame for their nakedness after they go against God’s command; the natural world metaphors applying to the human world throughout the Bible; the way natural landscapes reflect or magnify human feelings or states of affairs: for example, the flourishing of virtue and the desolation of betrayal.

Whether the creation story in Genesis is beneficial, destructive or ambivalent towards the environment depends on how it is interpreted, as pointed out by Stibbe (2021, p. 195) when juxtaposing two radically different readings, the one by Lynn White (1967)—briefly illustrated in Section 2—and the other one by Charles Camosy (2017)—who emphasizes the companionship between animals and humans in the first two chapters of Genesis:

I often tell my theology students that Genesis 1 and 2 are among the best pro-animal texts we could ever imagine there being. Nonhuman animals and humans are created on the same day of creation. Both share the breath of life. God commands humans to eat plants. Animals are brought to Adam, not to kill and eat, but “because it is not good man should be alone”.

Thus, depending both on the narrative elements and the lexical choice foregrounded by the interpreter, this origin story can be perceived as beneficial or destructive: beneficial if it appears to encourage caring for animals and the whole of creation, or destructive if it appears to encourage dominion and exploitation of the natural world. In light of the discussion above, this story also proves deeply ambivalent as it features humans in two antithetical roles depending on the story’s timeline: first as guardians of the created world and, then, after they have infringed God’s command, as outcasts full of shame.

According to Stibbe’s ecolinguistics framework, popular views and habitual behaviors gain momentum from framing, defined as “a story which uses a package of knowledge about one area of life (a frame) to structure how another area of life is conceptualized” (Stibbe 2021, p. 40). For example, depending on whether climate change is framed as an environmental issue or, instead, as a global security threat, quite different measures would be put in place. The way we use our knowledge of a situation to respond to problems and, possibly, to adopt respectful, life-enhancing behaviors is one of the leading principles of ecolinguistics. Likewise, the way in which humans use their knowledge for personal gain or the common good is a recurrent and well-developed theme throughout the Bible.

6. Concluding Remarks

The Bible, one of the most influential books of all time and the world over with all its ongoing translations, has been studied from a wide array of perspectives encompassing both academic and popular approaches, each contributing valuable insights into its rich texture of narratives, times, places and meanings (Gunn and Fewell 1993; Hayes 2012; Vermeulen and Hayes 2022). However, in contemporary society, the Bible’s positioning as the word of God has lost much of its appeal to people much more in touch with the rational side of science and technology, and the overwhelming agenda of a profit-driven knowledge economy (Field 2014; Fulks et al. 2023, pp. 5–6). In place of institutionalized religiosity and agnosticism, spiritual awareness and mindfulness seem to be the way forward (Moberg et al. 2012).

The underlying ideologies—anthropocentric or theocentric—that have been associated with the story of the Biblical origins both fail to acknowledge the extraordinary importance of the whole of creation, which replaces “a formless wasteland, and darkness cover[ing] the abyss” with a stunning variety and abundance of creatures. The greatest and most intriguing erasure in this story is precisely the reason for God’s creation: why according to the Biblical story—in contrast to other origin stories that resort to natural phenomena or the gods’ craving for power—the world was created by God’s act of will. In the absence

of a narrator who clarifies the thinking behind the action, we can only infer God's motive from the story itself and catch a glimpse of an artist's desire to realize something "good" as well as a parent's care for their newborn creatures.

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Notes

- ¹ Both organizations involve scholars and professionals across countries and fields of expertise: the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture adopts diverse approaches including sustainability, indigenous traditions, applied social sciences, ethics, religious studies, political science and anthropology (<https://www.issrnc.org/about/>, accessed on 15 May 2023); the Earth Bible Project aims to interpret the Bible from the perspective of the earth and in light of ecojustice principles (<https://www.webofcreation.org/Earthbible/earthbible.html>, accessed on 15 May 2023).
- ² Some key quotations on the sacredness of nature according to the world religions are showcased on the United Nations Environment Programme web page at <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment-programme/faith-earth-initiative/religions-and-environmental-protection> (accessed on 29 May 2023).
- ³ It is worth noting that the *Holy Bible* (2015), available at <https://biblehub.com/>, adopts two different verbs, "govern" and "reign", which suggest guardianship rather than exploitation: "Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground". (accessed on 22 June 2023).
- ⁴ See (Harrison 1999, p. 88): "A number of biblical scholars have patiently tried to explain that when we examine such Hebrew terms as 'have dominion' and 'subdue', we find that they do not really mean 'have dominion' and 'subdue'. James Barr, for example, informs us that the verb *rada*—'have dominion'—is not a particularly strong expression and was used to refer to Solomon's peaceful rule; *kabash*, "subdue", refers simply to 'the 'working' or 'tilling' of the ground in the J story'. Lloyd Steffen follows suit, pointing out that while it is true that one of the meanings of the word 'dominion' (*rada*) is 'to tread down', what the term denotes in the Genesis context is 'the ideal of just and peaceful governance'. Dominion, he concludes, 'is not a domination concept'". A similar argumentation is put forward by Hiebert (2019, p. 267) when he argues that the superior status of human beings conferred on them by their being created in God's image is precisely the reason why their rule is respectful rather than exploitative: "Humans' primary biblical vocation is to be responsible for the world as God would be. The translation 'take charge' in CEB [Common English Bible] further emphasizes this representative nature of human rule". (see also Ravasi 2021, p. 37).
- ⁵ See (Holloway 2016) for a deeply insightful, thought-provoking and refreshingly humorous account of world religions.
- ⁶ It is worth bearing in mind that "The Bible is not a catechism, a book of systematic theology, or a manual of religion, despite the fact that at a much later time, very complex systems of theology would be spun from particular interpretations of biblical passages. There is nothing in the Bible that corresponds to prevailing modern western notions of religion; indeed, there is no word for religion in the language of biblical Hebrew" (Hayes 2012, p. 24).
- ⁷ See (Wierzbicka 2001, 2019) for an insightful deconstruction of the vocabulary of Christianity and its culturally loaded words/concepts.
- ⁸ The first lines in the original Hebrew text have given rise to contrasting interpretations, some of which question the *creatio ex nihilo* and argue that heaven and earth were already there or had been created by God before the actual start of the origin story (see van Wolde 2009, 2016).
- ⁹ In his critique of traditional biblical translations in English, Theodore Hiebert (2019, p. 265) observes the following: "Biblical writers were seriously interested in the natural world, as seriously interested as contemporary scientists are. This real interest in the world has been obscured because biblical thought has been connected primarily with a spiritual rather than a material realm, or with a historical religion rather than a nature religion". See also (Armstrong 1996, p. 16): "For the biblical writers, the natural world was not inert and dead. It shared God's own potency, teemed with life, and had its own integrity".
- ¹⁰ See one of the meanings for *sky* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* 2023: "4. Heaven, the celestial abode of God or gods; (also) heavenly power or powers".
- ¹¹ The closeness between man and God is reinforced by the words used, each pointing to a different and complementary aspect: "image" refers to the inner being, while "likeness" suggests a physical similarity. Commenting on the meaning of the Hebrew

word *tselem* (“image”), which indicates a relationship of analogy and “makes present something that is absent”, Ellen van Wolde 1997, pp. 27–29) observes that every human being acts as a pointer to God and makes God present in the world.

12 Contrasting interpretations of this second creation story have been put forward: according to some, the Genesis 1 scene is here illuminated and described in greater detail (see Collins 2006; van Wolde 1997), while, according to others, they are two different accounts (Armstrong 1996; Hiebert 2022).

13 It may be interesting to note how the differences in translation, i.e., “leather garments” in *The New American Bible* as opposed to “animal skins” in *The New Living Translation*, frame this story in different ways more or less aligned with an ecotheological reading: while the phrase “leather garments” emphasize the clothing, “animal skins” suggest the death of the animals, usually provoked by humans according to the farming system adopted in ancient Jewish society. Given the scarcity of details and the atemporal setting of the origin story, it is possible to regard the leather garments as supplied by living animals. Cf. (van Wolde 1997, p. 52): “The [...] animals ensure that the human being gets clothing which warms and protects him and her as they till the earth [...]. In this sense one can say that God makes the animals as a help for the transition from a life in the garden to a life outside the garden”.

14 See (Hayes 2017, p. 71): “the Garden of Eden story in Genesis 2–3 makes it clear that humans traded immortality for free will”.

15 See Marlow and Harris (2022, pp. 3–5) on how the use of the word ‘nature’, absent in Hebrew, can convey a Western worldview as “ancient authors explained natural phenomena in terms of God’s actions in the world”, rather than according to scientific laws.

16 See (Walker-Jones 2019, p. 278): “In the context of the book as a whole, all creation is in relationship with God and praises God. Psalm 148.10 calls on “the living being (הַחַיִּים) and every domestic beast, creeping beings and winged birds” to praise God”.

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