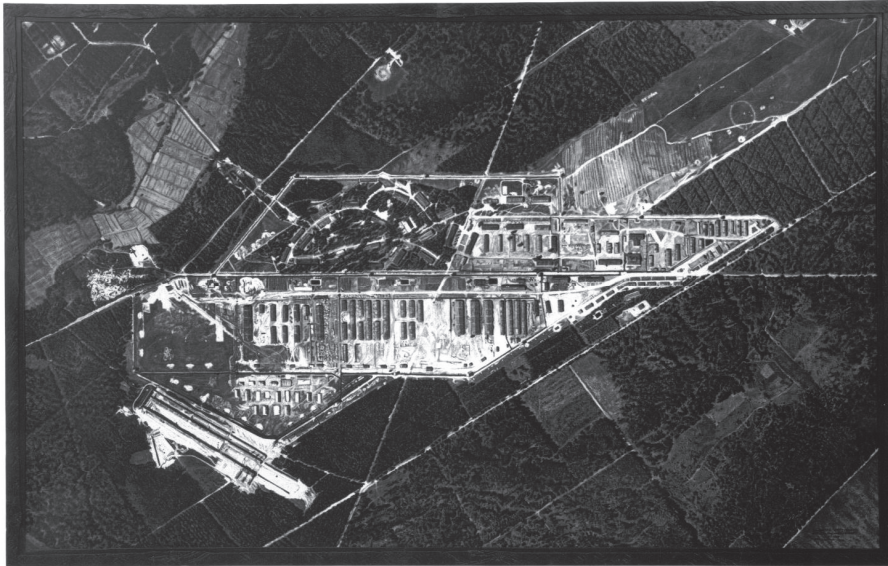


# HOLOCAUST AND NATURE

Edited and Introduced by Didier Pollefeyt



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## Preface

Didier Pollefeyt

In this volume Holocaust scholars reflect on the challenges of the Holocaust for our contemporary relation to nature. Currently there are not many studies available that deal with the relation between the Holocaust and ecological issues. In the first place the Holocaust was a human catastrophe, an evil committed against humanity, not against nature. In the first decade of the twenty first century, the ecological crisis has become increasingly central within the public arena. The destruction of our natural environment represents a threat for the whole human race. In connection with the ecological crisis the expression ‘ecological Holocaust’ is often used, stressing the seriousness of the present condition of planet earth and the way we deal with it. However, at the same time this expression risks reducing the historical Holocaust perpetrated by Nazism (1933-1945) to just being a metaphor for evil, suffering and death in general. This book tries to connect the specific, moral drama of the historical Holocaust of the twentieth century with contemporary ecological issues. The authors in this volume reveal the many, complex and challenging connections that can be found between the historical Holocaust, the way the Nazis understood nature, the way the victims of the Holocaust experienced nature and the way we approach nature today both on an individual and collective level.

Connecting the topics of Holocaust and nature often meets resistance both from the side of people working in ecology and from people working in Holocaust and genocide studies. For ecologists, it is not always clear why we should put so much energy into analysing a genocide that happened more than sixty years ago while today the human race as a whole is endangered by an even greater catastrophe. They are also often concerned that bringing ecology and Nazism into too close a relation – because of the ecological concerns and interests of the Nazi’s – could harm the ecological movement today. From the side of Holocaust and genocide studies objections and resistance also arise through questions like: “Why care so much about animals and animal rights when human rights are violated and continue to be violated to such a large extent?” Still another danger is connected with making comparisons too easily between the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust and the treatment of animals in modern technological food industries, at the cost of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. These complexities, and many times ambivalences, in the links between Holocaust and nature also belong to the object of this volume.

This book will study the relation between Holocaust and nature from the perspective of the victims, the perpetrators and the bystanders. For the victims of the Holocaust, nature was often a mixed blessing, a source of both pain and hope. Next to the Nazi atrocities, nature was often a source of additional pain and suffering (cold, hunger, disease, etc.). Many victims’ testimonies witness to the indifference of nature regarding their suffering, or to the radical rupture between the beauty of nature and

the trauma of genocidal evil. But nature was also often a source of comfort and hope. It offered a structure to keep oneself in life (time schedule, day and night, the rhythm of the seasons, etc.) or it was the source of aesthetic and even religious experiences. The relation of the perpetrators to nature can certainly be seen as complex and yet from a completely different angle, it was rather a perverted relation. On the one hand, Nazism claimed a close relation with nature, even glorifying “Blood and Soil” (*Blut und Boden*). It celebrated the contact of the German people with the land and it saw an almost mystical bond between the German land and German blood. On the other hand, the physical reality was depreciated and exploited mercilessly through modern technology, Nazi eugenics, medical experiments, gender manipulation, the destruction of the landscape by the construction of extermination camps etc. But most of all, the integrity of the earth was spoiled with the blood and bodies of the innocent victims. Further, the perspective of the bystanders also has relevance for observation and study here. We know from Holocaust studies how decisive the role of the bystanders was in making the Holocaust possible. Today, we see before our very eyes how the ecological crisis is developing. We are all bystanders, and some will say that we are even “all perpetrators”. Can we learn something from the study of the Holocaust bystanders for dealing with the present ecological crisis? Today, we as bystanders develop analogous reactions to the bystanders of sixty years ago: “is it not exaggerated?”, “this can never be true”, “what can we do as individuals against such large scale problems”, etc. During the Holocaust, some bystanders became rescuers through small individual actions or through political engagement. Can we learn something from them and can the lessons of the Holocaust make us tomorrow’s rescuers of the earth?

Today we can no longer be ignorant about the negative effects of our actions on the natural world. John Roth considers the remembrance of the Holocaust as a resource that can aid and help us significantly in dealing with nature. In the first chapter of this volume in response to the question “What have we learned from the Holocaust?”, he reflects on the answers “not enough” and “maybe something”. The importance of thinking further about the content of this *something* is emphasised, but Roth is also aware of the risk involved in producing a new hope that is naïve and inadequate.

It was only with the development of modern Western science and technology, in the late nineteenth century, that humanity fully realized that they could take control of nature and manipulate it. Peter J. Haas asserts in chapter two that it was various medical discoveries that actually lay behind the Nazi attempt to create a new natural, and so social, order. It was exactly this possibility to control nature that created the foundation for the Holocaust. More concretely, Haas shows how the Nazis’ intermingling of racial theory, social Darwinism, eugenics and expanding medical knowledge contributed to the Holocaust. In fact, the incorporation of eugenic programs, and subsequent genocide, into Nazi public policy can be understood as

the practical applications of medical science, as they understood it, to the social problems of post World War I Germany.

The embeddedness of – and ambiguity towards – nature in Nazi ideology is meticulously articulated in Margaret Brearley's essay in this volume (chapter three). The notion that Nature is the source of human power and creativity and must be preserved in its pristine state was counterbalanced, in Nazi principles, by the often radical exploitation of natural resources for military or even artistic purposes. Similarly, the Nazi vision of the perfect Aryan body trained to fight for – or biologically reproduce – that ideal was offset by the willing risk of mass death in submission to that very ideal.

Throughout history, the anti-Jewish legend of the wandering Jew was used to describe the Jewish situation in the Diaspora. In her chapter, Rochelle L. Millen describes the centrality of the land of Israel according to biblical and rabbinic sources and the interpretations of the medieval thinker Moses Nahmanides. She compares these with the Christian interpretations of the same passages, concluding with the vision of the Enlightenment on Jews and nationhood. According to Millen those Christian and rational outlooks were the immediate cause for both the Holocaust and for the famous Zionist theories on nature and the land of Israel by Moses Hess, Leon Pinsker and Ahad Ha'am.

Today's environmentalism isn't as innocent as it seems. In chapter five, David Patterson draws attention to some shocking likenesses it shares with the Nazi vision on nature: both are pagan points of view, solely interested in nature as an end in itself. Instead of the voice of Nature, Patterson offers an alternative one: the voice *beyond* Nature: the voice of G-d, seen through the eyes of Jewish mysticism. The environment has become the concern of the future, but Patterson reminds us to keep an eye on the past.

In the Bible humanity's relationship to nature is not just a matter of oppression, as is often believed. Although not only humanity, but the whole of creation has been taken up in the covenant with God, it is only humanity who has been called on to take responsibility for nature's survival. A hermeneutical openness to nature as God's creation is needed. The meaning of nature as a Trace of God's creation will only present itself when humanity is able to reserve a space within itself for the other as other. And according to the Jewish philosopher Catherine Chalier, it is this disinterestedness that should contain the key to a new, ethical relationship with nature. Even *after* Auschwitz, Didier Pollefeyt argues in chapter six, we are able to perceive nature as a work of God and to relate with it in a morally responsible way.

For Sarah K. Pinnock, the majority of Jewish authors research the Holocaust and nature from a male and patriarchal perspective. In her chapter she shows the other side of the coin through feminist theories and the testimonies of female Holocaust victims. Her focus on female authors is motivated by a desire to include women's voices in the dialogue on Holocaust and nature. She therefore deals with the work of two female Jewish thinkers whose writings relate directly to these themes: Simone

Weil and Melissa Raphael. In the work of these authors she hopes to find a more holistic view on humanity and nature.

This book as a whole is constructed in the form of a dialogue among the authors. Every chapter is followed by responses from two other authors and then a subsequent response by the original author.

The last chapter describes Arie Galles' view on the relationship of Holocaust and nature. As a child, Galles grew up in post-Nazi Poland, living among the ruins left by the *Third Reich*. Many years later, in 1993, while visiting a local Holocaust Memorial Centre, the same experiences came back again; leading to his work of art called 'Fourteen Stages' or '*Hey Yud Daled*', fourteen aerial views of extermination camps, painted in charcoal. They give strong indications of how Nazism violated both humans and the landscape. As Arie Galles writes on his website, although art can't express the Holocaust, it would be to assign victory to the perpetrators if we were ever to withdraw art from confronting this horror.<sup>1</sup> The cover of this book presents Stage Five and is his artistic aerial presentation of the camp of Bergen-Belsen. This book also ends with work from Galles, more specifically a fragment from his written diaries, where the artist describes his experiences, thoughts and feelings while making Stage Five of his masterpiece. The title of this diary fragment is 'Skull' referring to the skull that appeared in Stage Five on the center right of the camp, just outside the fence (see the cover of this book), in front of the eyes of the artist while he was drawing. Galles' areal perspective on the camp of Bergen-Belsen shows in a moving and shocking way how the Nazis not only destroyed the moral landscape but also the natural landscape. The skull in the drawing and on the cover of this book shows in an artistic way how even nature reveals the deathly character of Nazism and protests against its genocidal politics. In his diary at the end of this volume, Galles writes: "Is Nature screaming to heavens the nature of this place?"

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<sup>1</sup> Arie A. Galles, *Fourteen Stages: Hey Yud Daled* on his website <http://www.ariegalles.com/fourteen-stations.html> (accessed March 2010).

## The Bible in the ecological debate:

### Obstacle or Guide?

Didier Pollefeyt

#### INTRODUCTION: BIBLE AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Ever since the beginning of ecological thinking, the Jewish and Christian religious traditions have been identified as one of the most important causes for today's environmental crisis.<sup>272</sup> Biblical texts, the argument goes, would be responsible for exalting man to the position of the anthropocentric pinnacle of nature. Being the only creature made in God's likeness, man's mission is to 'have dominion' over nature and to 'subdue' it (Gen 1:26-28).<sup>273</sup> By such phrases the Bible seems to suggest that nature is merely the object of man's capriciousness and self-glorification (*cf.* instrumentalist anthropocentrism, as denounced by Gaia's film about battery cages for chickens). Or, as it was well put by a student, the proposition that (only) 'man is made after God's (imageless) image' is a pretentious Jewish-Christian statement.

In the present chapter, we intend to take this criticism seriously by means of a philosophical in-depth reading of the Bible. We are inspired in this by the thought of the Jewish philosopher Catherine Chalié,<sup>274</sup> a former pupil of Emmanuel Levinas. In doing so we will try to uncover a 'forgotten' dimension of the Jewish-Christian tradition, namely the *connectedness* of the Biblical concept of God with the whole of creation (Jer 33:25).

Chalié says that the demise of the 'ecological' dimension within the Jewish tradition is connected to the historical experiences of exile of the Jewish people, experiences that brought with them an alienation from their country for the duration of centuries and a forced dissociation from nature and its rhythms. To the extent that the Jewish people were 'tolerated' by foreign societies, they were also systematically denied immediate and intimate contact with nature. Moreover, this enforced reticence towards nature has always had an apologetic function in Judaism, as it allowed people to distance themselves from pagan idolatry and the deification of natural and cosmic forces. On the downside, however, this defensive attitude led to the loss of the idea that the path to the secret runs *through* nature as the work of God. The great Jewish liturgical festivals, which commemorate historical events, were celebrated without reference to the moments in nature's cycle with which they coincide and which they factually celebrate. Nature only was a comfortless desolation that surrenders man to alien, depersonalising forces of being (*il y a*) (Levinas). God is totally 'other', completely different from the world (*autrement qu'être*), hidden in a total transcendence, which has no reference point whatsoever in the 'good' creation.

<sup>272</sup> For an apt example, see Lynn White's remarkable and provocative article, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," in *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-1207.

<sup>273</sup> Johan De Tavernier, "Ecologie en ethiek," in *Collationes* 23 (1993), 393-418, p. 403.

<sup>274</sup> Catherine Chalié, *L'alliance avec la nature* (La nuit surveillée) (Paris : Cerf, 1989), p. 211.



However, man's forlorn state, living in a cold and indifferent world is neither the first nor the last that is said about man's relationship to nature in the Bible. On the contrary, this chapter will show that, in the Bible, the covenant between God and man takes shape within the heart of creation itself, that nature has been touched by the same creative breath from which man has sprung, and that all things have a common goal.

#### THE FACE OF NATURE?

When in 1991 we visited Catherine Chalier's teacher, Emmanuel Levinas, in Paris in the company of a group of students, one of my students asked him whether 'an animal has a face'. Levinas was visibly surprised by the question. In his thinking nature is understood chiefly as *il y a*, some sort of a formless and impersonal swarming, as 'being without a face', as that which depersonalises. This view of nature can be elucidated by a quick look at the *Sitz im Leben* from which Levinas' thought has grown.<sup>275</sup> The notion of *il y a* was first developed in Levinas' book *De l'existence à l'existant*, which was written during his internment in a *Wehrmacht* camp in Hannover in 1939. In the camp, Levinas and some fellow-Jews were assigned to a special command that had to carry out heavy duty labour in the woods nearby. During his days in the labour camp, Levinas went through a grim existential *struggle for life* against the depersonalising forces of nature. His notion of *il y a* can thus be seen as a philosophical translation of this experience. It is then also quite evident that Levinas did not become a lover of nature and rather turned to the city in later life. For Levinas, philosophy does not start from the miracle of nature (as it does for Heidegger, who speaks of the 'lights of being'), but from the trauma of evil.<sup>276</sup> He holds that God reveals Himself in the vulnerable face of the other, which can take down every fragmentation, and not in the merciless, unpredictable forces of nature that harm man's vulnerability. This may explain the fact that Levinas has not developed his thought on the level of ecology. Unlike her mentor, Chalier does take up the challenge of ecological thinking from the perspective of Levinas' thought. Where Levinas speaks of God revealing Himself in the face of the other, Chalier speaks of God revealing Himself in the *traces* He has left in nature. With her notion of 'the trace of God', Chalier combats two one-sided views on the relationship between God and nature: the pagan identification of God with nature on one hand, and the modern day desacralisation of nature on the other. According to a later interpretation of the creation story, God creates being out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) through the Word. The concept of creation implies God's transcendence over the world. Through the creation God calls into existence something other than Himself. As a matter of fact, the Bible thus articulates a sharp criticism of pagan practices that deify nature. The Biblical God is not the diffuse, supportive ground for Being that exercises a 'fascinating' and 'frightening' attraction over man which is so great that man wants to participate in this ground and wishes to dissolve in

<sup>275</sup> See our contribution Didier Pollefeyt, "The Trauma of the Holocaust as a Central Challenge of Levinas' Ethical and Theological Thought," in *Remembering for the Future II* (Oxford/New York, NJ: Pergamon Press, 1994).

<sup>276</sup> Didier Pollefeyt & Luc Anckaert, "Tussen trauma en verwondering. Rosenzweig, Levinas en Fackenheim," in Bart Raymaekers, ed., *Gehelen en fragmenten. De vele gezichten van de filosofie* (Louvain: University Press Leuven, 1993), 159-164.

it. Such a *Gott mit uns* would no longer be a critical, Biblical ‘opposite’, but a numinous power that on the one hand stirs up the human being to a blind and irrational enthusiasm, but on the other hand spreads an arbitrary terror that dissolves the basis for any kind of personal response-ability.

The Jewish tradition holds that God’s glory exists precisely in the fact that He has placed someone in his creation who can seek Him out in his separation and who is *in the ability* of being responsive to Him (though not obliged to do so). Holding on to the absolute transcendence of the Creator implies the possibility of atheism. Man can experience the irreversible separation between God and the world as an enormous absence. Human beings are in danger of being overwhelmed by the inhuman neutrality of a silent and obscure cosmos.

The distance between God and the world, however, is not absolute for the Bible. Nature is not merely the atheist, threatening *il y a* that has to be controlled. The entire cosmos contains Traces of God’s creative actions. Man is called to uncover and unravel the Traces that God has left in his Creation, and to bring new life to their meaning. Yet, this presupposes a hermeneutical attitude towards nature on the part of the believer.

#### TOWARDS A HERMENEUTICS OF NATURE

The tradition often attributes the Jewish forgetfulness towards nature to the rabbinic passion for the study of the Scripture. The Jewish exegete searches after the power of the text (hence not a literal, fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible). He closely examines the verses in hopes of finding (previously) hidden faces. Because of this, however, the rabbi not infrequently progressively forgets the necessity to contemplate that other great riddle: creation.

Although nature is not divine, it does testify of God. It can just as well be seen as a great ‘Book’ (a text) which has to be read and interpreted to (get to) know He who has left His Signature in the whole of Creation. The Creator of nature and the Giver of the Torah are thus one and the same God. Especially Chassidism has taken this other route towards finding God’s love, rather than studying the Scripture. Chassidism has returned to careful listening to the earth and the heavens which speak of the Beauty of the Eternal on earth. Its followers are taught that nature is the place where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have found revelation.

The fact that God can also be found in that other book (nature), in no way means the end of the relevance of the Scripture. On the contrary, the Scripture itself tells us to look to nature as a work wherein God has left his Traces. Without the Scripture, man would never be able to listen to Creation as the site of God’s revelation. When we would read nature *in opposition to* the Scripture, we would never be able to find that of what nature is the sign. Then, the temptation of paganism, wherein nature itself is exalted to being an ultimate, divine reality (*cf.* the theology of Rubenstein), would arise.

The interdependence of reading nature and reading the Scripture even stretches beyond this. For nature can not be read differently from the words in the Scripture. Contemplating nature as a ‘riddle’, which means that nature is thought of as receptive



to a hermeneutics (or interpretation), is principally impossible for some one who has not learned to read the Scripture. 'Hermeneutics' can be placed in opposition to 'dogma' here. A dogma is posited without riposte, as if the utterance would once and for all be fixed in the unchanging character of the letter. The Jewish tradition, conversely, holds that the Torah has seventy faces. The Torah is as it were waiting for every (irreplaceable) generation of readers. The Zohar, the collection of influential mystical comments on the five books of Moses, calls for heavenly joy for every new interpretation of the Scripture. Because it is not the literal meaning that matters, every new reader is important. The Scripture needs to be taken up time and time again as a pathway to its secret, the transcendence, which as it were must be begged to the surface. Without such an exegesis as hermeneutics, the Scripture would be meaningless for us, like a flame without a wick, slowly dying out.

The old imperative to search for Traces of God in the humility of the verses and the letters of the Bible, to search for the part of the secret which it still harbours, now *mutatis mutandis* also applies to the Traces that God has left in the 'clods of the earth' (Job 38:38) and the 'rocky crags' (Job 39:28). For, like the Scripture, nature presents its riddle to us as a language that asks to be interpreted. Truth sprouts from nature, similar to the way it reveals itself to a student of the Scripture.

In Chaliar's thought, the Scripture thus is the necessary mediation between man and nature. Without the Scripture, man runs the risk of contenting himself with the immanent beauty of nature. Pantheism is not far off in such a case. The study of the Scripture, on the other hand, teaches man to orient himself to the Infinite that is revealed in and through the cosmos, but which is not the cosmos itself. The Scripture teaches man to see beyond that his own (literal) horizon. No matter how incredibly small the Scripture may be in comparison with the overwhelming dimensions of nature, it still offers the perspective through which nature *can* reveal itself as the Word of God.

#### MAN: LORD AND MASTER OVER NATURE?

A hermeneutical openness to nature as God's creation such as the one described above is not quite as evident as it may seem. A good example of the need for an apt attitude to see Creation as God's revelation is the story of Job. After a long period of remaining terribly silent to Job's protest, God suddenly decides to reply to Job with an inventory of the richness of His Creation. Job thus does not get the answer he was hoping for: a theoretical explanation or some words of comfort are not on God's mind. God just presents Job with His Creation as if His answer to Job's misery lies there. He speaks to Job about the coming to being of Creation: 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?' (Job 38:4). The beauty of the Creator which shines through in all things, great and small, had been unnoticed by Job. Seeing this beauty with own eyes, as he does from that moment onwards, was something that had to be taught to him. His misery was an obstacle in his understanding of the language of the Creation. The miserable are condemned to live within the confined limits of their own ill bodies. They are hounded by their own vulnerability, which turns every contact with the world into inhuman torture. The hermeneutical paralysis of suffering men is a consequence of

their inability to safeguard some space in themselves where the other can be received. Job's immense sufferings deprived him of the ability to look to nature through a different frame of mind, and not merely see it as something that just pursues its own course, totally indifferent to his misery, almost mocking him. How great is not the temptation to see nature merely as an eternal and vain frivolity (Eccl 1:5-6)?

The receptivity for that specific, 'appealing' opening in nature, that unique marking in nature which orients man to an *au-delà*, is hard to experience for someone (miserable) who is strongly bound to his own being. When man is absorbed in his interest for his own being (Levinas), he will not be able to see nature as the work of God wherein He has left a Trace. God only shows Himself to those who are receptive to His Traces. In extreme circumstances, this receptive attitude can best be described as sanctity. A saint is someone who always leaves space in himself for the beautiful, even when he is filled with and surrounded by nothing but death and destruction. Etty Hillesum describes the intensity of being touched by a blooming jasmine that was reaching up to the blue sky in the mud of the Nazi camp in Westerbork. In a place where all is lost and abandoned, Hillesum learns to listen to nature, as if the sense for the other, hidden in nature, can only be found in places where all human and natural sumptuousness has been discarded, where man is thrown back upon his lowest degree of being.<sup>277</sup> Chalier calls experiences like that of Hillesum 'desert experiences'. In the desert, man is stripped of everything, initiated in the humility of being deprived of every form of possession and almost forced into an extreme listening to the meaning that comes out of the paucity of things. The Hebrew language holds an immemorial connection between 'the one who speaks' (*medaber*) and 'the desert' (*midbar*). In the desert of Sinai the Jewish people, still burdened by their suffering as slaves and with the hardship of their passage on their minds, received the Torah. It seems as if they had to go through the experience of the great prohibition to appropriate things before they could enter the Promised Land, a land of 'milk and honey' (Ex 3:8), 'a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey' (Deut 8:8).

In the desert, man discovers that he is not always condemned to turn back upon himself but that he can open himself to the other which pulls him away from himself and which frees him of himself. The contemplation of nature can dis-engage man from his own individuality and lift him above his own interest. This way the infinite can invade his existence and order him to give up the things that normally keep him busy (health, money, and life) to the benefit of a destination that transcends the narrow limits of his own interest.

Precisely this relation to nature has become problematic today. In modernity, man has set himself up as the *maître et possesseur* of nature (Descartes). The physical world has been reduced to its mathematical dimensions and has been brought to silence. Although the world is still an enormous book 'written in a mathematical language' (Galilei), it no longer speaks to the human heart. The modern world no longer participates in an attentive hermeneutics of nature, but forces nature only to answer the self-interested questions that man asks it. It is not the 'exegesis' which is central in our understanding of nature today, but the 'genesis' of nature. Modern Bible exegesis is

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<sup>277</sup> Etty Hillesum, *De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, Klaas.A.D. Smelik (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 1991, third revised edition).

often limited to a study of the Bible's 'genesis', which is a study of the social, historical and literary background of the Bible texts, as if those collected texts are merely a worn-out fossil that no longer sets one to thinking.<sup>278</sup> Similarly, modern science mostly focuses on the laws of physics without believing in a 'talmudic' reading of nature, which is a reading that brings to light the new, current, and unspoiled power that speaks from nature. The strict, mathematical approach of science thus has become the only legitimate approach for studying nature (and the Scripture). This, in turn, leads to a state of affairs wherein the proud theoretical study of the genesis of natural phenomena replaces exegesis' humble singular search for meaning. Man's inexhaustible urge for control reduces and substitutes the speaking power of nature. This brings along the deep existential fear that sometimes takes a hold of people when they discover that nature's riddle will in the end always be undecipherable. At such moments, science leaves us with many uncertainties about the place and the meaning of our presence on earth. A saying by Pascal is exceptionally paradigmatic for this feeling: "*le silence eternal de ces espaces infinis m'effraie (the eternal silence of those infinite spaces frighten me)*."<sup>279</sup> With this phrase, Pascal expresses the panic of modern man who feels himself to be radically alien in a universe that has been constructed by the measuring and calculating mind, a universe in which order has replaced interpretation.

#### NATURE AS A MEETING PLACE WITH THE OTHER

As such, the modern, totalising subject of the *Aufklärung* is the most important obstacle for a hermeneutics of nature as a work of God. The ideal of scientific objectivity makes modern man lose its sense of humbleness: he is no longer capable to receive within himself that which goes beyond his self-interested concepts and theories. As lord and master over nature, modern man has lost every openness for a meaning and sense which gives itself in the form of an infiniteness, and which at the same time also retreats itself in its giving as the humbleness of a Trace. By confining reality in a network of concepts and theories, a hermeneutical interaction with that which will always throw up resistance as alterity and exteriority has been totally lost. Instead of astonishment for things that will always resist its reductions as 'the other', science has developed a deep aversion for the riddle of nature, a riddle which nonetheless holds a secret that should encourage people to a different kind of hermeneutical thinking.

Watching and listening to nature with modesty and dis-interestedness, without wanting to immediately claim and possess it, is in other words a prerequisite for the welcoming of the infinite in the finite. The meaning of nature as a Trace of God's creation will only present itself when man is able to reserve a space within himself for the other as other. This other does not force itself on man, but gives itself in the discretion of a presence that always retreats at the moment that it is in danger of being trapped by the concept. Thus, it is not so much a matter of apprehension of the other, but rather a

<sup>278</sup> Roger Burggraeve, *De bijbel geeft te denken: schepping, milieu, lijden, roeping, Gods passie en de ander, vergeving, bevrijding van de ethiek, in gesprek met Levinas* (Louvain: Acco, 1991), chapter 1.

<sup>279</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Parijs, Flammarion, 1973), nr. 91.

matter of receiving the other, averse to any violent conceptualisation, and up to the point of shuddering for the fragility of this other. For Chaliel, this disinterestedness contains, precisely by its opening up and redirection of our own needs and interests, the key to a new, ethic relationship with nature. When man is called to 'subdue' nature, this does not mean that he is called to abuse it, shamelessly exploit or reduce it to whatever profits one can get out of it. It is the submission of that which embodies the Trace of creation, of that which does not coincide with being human and which is never to be reduced to the human. Man has to abandon a purely reductionist view of nature. When he discovers the Traces of creation in the things he controls and cultivates, he will also become aware of the fact that he is not *chez soi* in this world, that he fundamentally is and remains a stranger.

The ethical encounter with nature thus presupposes the ethical excellence of the subject, to the extent that it is capable of orienting itself towards the other, without continually returning to itself. Only such an ethical subjectivity can be witness of nature as a work of God. Ethics opens up the immanence of the natural order and the human control over it by opening itself for an *au-delà* that has been left in it as a divine Trace. Without ethics, in other words, the riddle of nature stays lost, distancing itself in nature's violent indifference. The meaning of nature can thus not be deduced from some rational or technical analysis, similar to the way in which natural theology searched for the great motor of the universe. The riddle's meaning is radically dependent on man's readiness to reshape itself to an openness, to a meeting place wherein the other can live. Only the disinterested humbleness of the mind and the heart opens up the room that is necessary for a contemplation of nature as a work of God. Without the ethical subjectivity the riddle of nature finally withdraws behind an unreachable horizon.

#### THE MIRACLE OF NATURE?

Of course, the question remains whether 'after Auschwitz' such a view of nature is not dreadfully naive. In the concentration camps nature has not only shown itself as utterly indifferent to man's fate (the flowers were equally beautiful in Auschwitz), but also as a supplementary source of suffering (cold, hunger). How can one in the century of Auschwitz still speak of the divine 'miracle' of nature? Still, many in the concentration camps were able to retain their ability to, with astounding mental clarity, receive the birth of every new day as a pathway to the other and a gift from God. Many Jews in Auschwitz also continued their prayers and the celebration of liturgical holidays, wherein, even more than before, the connection with nature's cycles played an important role. They again looked to the sun and the stars as God presented them at the beginning of creation: 'for signs and for seasons and for days and years' (Gen 1:14).

That is why Chaliel still dares to speak of the 'miracle' of creation in the face of Auschwitz. Thanks to people like Hillesum, who *in* Auschwitz have seen nature as a Trace of God, we are still able to perceive nature as a work of God *after* Auschwitz. The experiences of Holocaust victims do not only make this possible, but they also categorically call upon us to not condemn man to a cosmic solitude because of

Auschwitz (Fackenheim).<sup>280</sup> Seeing nature as a ‘faceless abyss’ or a ‘cannibal Earth-Mother that can only be appeased and satisfied by human offerings’, as the Jewish ‘Holocaust theologian’ Richard Rubenstein does,<sup>281</sup> would amount to giving a posthumous victory to Hitler. The sacralisation of the immanent forces of nature and the *Wille zur Macht* were central concepts in Hitler’s *Weltanschauung* (cf. the classes: Nazism as an *avant-la-lettre* ecological movement)

At this point, we are able to formulate a critique of the way in which the ‘miracle’ is usually understood, namely as a random abolition of the natural order. Such an understanding of the miracle, however, reduces God’s diligence to ‘what is good for my own being’. Such a God becomes a *Gott mit uns*. Yet, God’s created nature obeys a regularity of laws that cannot be altered by the Creator. The medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135 – 1204) already said that the miracle is a possibility of nature, and not a consequence of an abolition of nature’s laws, laws that actually keep nature in existence. When God intervenes in natural processes, he does not damage the laws of physics according to Maimonides, but rather uses them to their optimal effect to His wishes. For Chaliel, the miracle does not happen a lot in the noise of great events, but rather discretely in the heart of daily events. We have to leave the prevailing idea of the miracle as an adaptation of the other to the will of the same. Exactly the opposite happens in the miracle: the invasion of the order of the same by the intrusion of the other. The miracle does not allow for a human explanation, as it immediately exceeds the limits of the understanding individual as the entrance of the other in the same.

The pre-eminent miracle is creation itself, not just as a singular divine act in a distant past, but as a wondrous event that keeps repeating itself in the present. For believers, God continues to create reality at every moment. The Jewish sabbatical year is a good illustration of this. When Jews stop working, sowing and harvesting for an entire year every seven years on the basis of a commandment of absolute rest for man and animal (Lev 25:2-7), they do not only express a complete distancing from the unlimited dominion over nature, but they also come very close to the idea of the continuous recreation of nature. Leaving the earth to itself, allowing it to rest completely, reminds man of the fact that he does not fully possess the earth, but also of the internal impetus that is at work in creation and which should be respected. Creation is not only a divine gift (Deut 21:1) which we can treat according to our own discretion, it is also animated by an unstoppable force that by definition escapes human omnipotence. The sabbatical year reminds us of the fact that ‘creating’ is not a singular past event, but that the creation produces itself constantly, again and again

<sup>280</sup> Emil Fackenheim, “Damit die Erde menschlich bleibt: gemeinsame Verantwortung von Juden und Christen für die Zukunft,” in G.B. Ginzel, ed., *Auschwitz als Herausforderung für Juden und Christen* (Heidelberg: Schneider, 1980), pp. 86-112. Also see our study D. Pollefeyt, *De Holocaust: de verhouding tussen theologie en ethiek op een keerpunt? Confrontatie met de joodse visie van Emil L. Fackenheim* (Unpublished master dissertation Theology, Louvain, 1991), p. 313, pp. 296-300.

<sup>281</sup> Richard Rubenstein, *De God van de joden na Auschwitz*. Translated from English by P. Telder (Utrecht: Ambo, 1968). Also see our study Didier Pollefeyt, *De Holocaust: het einde van theologie en ethiek? Confrontatie met de joodse visie van Richard L. Rubenstein* (Unpublished master dissertation Religious Studies: Louvain, 1988), p. 35-40.

every moment. All things are created out of nothing all the time. Without the continuously animating breath of God that constitutes the very inner of every being, things would relapse into nothingness. Charlier calls the idea of a continuous creation the foundation of God's own Name: 'I am who am' (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה)(Ex 3:14). God's promise to Moses is not only a pledge to never abandon Israel in the course of history, but it is also an expression of loyalty to the durability of all nature's life. God reveals a fundamental secret to Moses: he teaches him to recognize the infinite, divine life in the finite.

#### THE MESSIANIC CREATIVE ASSIGNMENT OF MAN

In the book Ezekiel, we find the idea that the messianic peace concerns both nature and the human community (Ezek 34:24-29). There is no hope of peace at the end of times when relationships between humans are good while the violation of nature continues. Reconciliation between manhood and nature is also necessary. For the prophet Isaiah, it is clear that the totality of creation awaits the end of times and the exile. As man has dragged nature along in his fall, nature will also participate in man's rebirth.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6-9)

The radical renewal of creation thus does not only concern man. For the Bible, it is no use speaking of salvation as long as the desert keeps its dryness, the fields their barrenness and the animals their cruelty. Moreover, the hope of salvation goes a lot further than the mere restoration of the order that was destroyed by sin and suffering. In the prophetic texts, a new reality is announced: a new heaven and a new earth.

#### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MAN AND ANIMAL

Although not only man, but the entirety of creation has been taken up in the covenant with God, it is only man who has been called on to hold the responsibility for nature's survival. An animal only follows its instincts and does not experience a desire to transcend its own nature (*cf.* the anthropology that we developed in the first session). It is not aware of the golden thread of the inner that links man to the transcendent. It does not have that intimate and fragile place where the transcendent can be received. The animal's drama is the radical dissociation of the inner and the outer. The animal is darkened by the power of its own impulses. It is forced to find satisfaction in the outer world, and at the same time this misty impulsivity obstructs any possibility to make space to receive meaning. Abraham's departure from Ur is a powerful symbol of man



letting go of the animal ties to nature, and his going on, from horizon to horizon, to find the meaning of existence in a dialogue with the Other (and this without returning to oneself, in contrast to Greek philosophy). Only man is capable of such a demanding interiority which enables him to receive the word of the Other.

It is *this* human being who is summoned to rule and have dominion over all creatures. Exactly in this responsibility for the entire universe lies man's calling and his unique being-image of an imageless God. Man is the only creature that can distance itself from itself, even if it is but during one moment of his life. Only man can 'disinterest' himself (*cf.* man as an ethic subject, the animal as an ethic object). I absolutely do not deny that self-interest is (or can be) healthy (*cf.* the optimistic anthropology: man is fundamentally oriented towards the good, also on the level of his own corporality), but I do want to ask whether man is not a murderer when he is only healthy.

Evidently, the necessity to appeal on nature's resources for man's needs will remain a fact of life, even if nature is transformed by man. It goes without saying that modern science is an improvement over premodern man's fear for the numinous, unpredictable forces of nature. Yet still, this known fact does not necessarily have to lead to the exploitation of nature for blind profits or man's tyrannical urges. Cultivating the earth, watching over the plants, descending into the heart of matter to distil life energy from it and even eating animal flesh to alleviate one's hunger, do not inevitably imply the destructive exploitation of natural resources and extorting animal life for commercial purposes. The first attitude holds on to the sense for the other. The second attitude cancels out this reference to alterity and complacently settles for a purely reductionist attitude wherein in the end only the interest for one's own being is the norm. The first position is enlightened by a concern for the good that gives meaning to human actions (this can for instance take form in an ordering of non-human life on the basis of a 'pathocentrism'). The second approach reduces itself to a functional rationality that contents itself with a limited concern for one's own being only.

#### PLEA FOR AN ETHICALLY QUALIFIED ANTHROPOCENTRISM

This chapter has shown how the recovery (*tikkun*) of the world, broken by man's and nature's suffering, is inseparably connected with altered thinking. Only human beings that are oriented by alterity can maintain the hope for a new heaven and a new earth. The realisation of this hope is already promisingly announced in God's Trace in nature itself. Catherine Chaliel has accordingly led Emmanuel Levinas' alterity thinking along ecological lines. The Scripture says man is the last step in creation. The entirety of God's creation was already there before man was created. Man, in other words, has to 'discover' the world, and can never pretend to be the source and origin of everything. We are discoverers ('exegetes') before we are creators ('genetisists'). Before we are to rule, we find ourselves in a relationship of givenness. 'Having dominion' is not the first step, man is placed in a certain relation to nature. Man is not only the *last* creation but also the *first* to be punished.<sup>282</sup> This demonstrates how man's relation to the creation is to be understood: as an ethical relationship.

<sup>282</sup> Roger Burggraeve, "Scheppingsvisie en ecologische opdracht: perspectieven vanuit Genesis 1," in Axel Liégeois, Joseph Selling, Luc Anckaert, Johan De Tavernier, Bert Roebben, Johan

Finally, let us briefly return to Levinas' reticence towards nature. Although nature is God's good creation, it eventually also has a threatening meaning. An aesthetic, holistic harmony model of nature is naïve, because it insufficiently takes into account nature's threatening disposition for man. The AIDS virus does not deserve any kind of respect. Genesis says that man 'has dominion', and this is also exactly what *should* be said (contrary to 'ecocentrism'). This phrase does not only oppose a certain (subjugating) God concept and does not only exalts man to a position of importance, but also reflects the experience of nature's ambivalence. As such, it is not so much the question whether man's return to nature is important, but rather the question to *which* earth we should return. 'Earth' with a capital is too good to be true. With Chaliel, we have opted for an anthropologically understood biblical-ecological revival – albeit not for any kind of anthropocentrism, but rather for an *ethically qualified* anthropocentrism. 'Which also means that God's great work waits for its exaltation by man.'<sup>283</sup>

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Verstraeten, *Aspecten van een christelijke sociale ethiek* (Louvain: Library of the Faculty of Theology, 1991), pp. 125-136.

<sup>283</sup> Concluding sentence in Chaliel, O.c., p. 207.