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The New Testament and integral ecology: Charting a path for interpretation

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Abstract

The New Testament and integral ecology: Charting a path for interpretation

This article outlines a novel approach to the interpretation of the New Testament from the perspective of integral ecology, thereby addressing an identified lacuna in the systematic application of ecological conceptual framework to the biblical corpus. Informed by recent eco-hermeneutical works, the article outlines a methodology for integral interpretation, which facilitates a reading of biblical texts that connects environmental concerns with their concomitant social, economic, and ethical dimensions, and acknowledges the interconnectedness of all creation. Analysis undertaken using this specified methodology indicates that selected New Testament passages reveal a significant call to stewardship and suggests that the overarching message of the New Testament is consonant with the principles of integral ecology, particularly in its social emphases. This study demonstrates the contribution of such an approach to the development of biblical ecotheology by proposing a novel interpretive tool that augments existing hermeneutical strategies. Whilst acknowledging the ancient context of the texts and the challenges presented by the predominant focus on the God-human relationship within the New Testament, the research underscores the viability and fruitfulness of the integral method in discerning ecological meaning and in providing an impetus for ecological conversion.

Keywords: New Testament, integral ecology, ecological hermeneutics, biblical interpretation, ecotheology

Abstrakt

Nowy Testament i ekologia integralna. Wytyczanie ścieżki interpretacji

Artykuł prezentuje nowe podejście do interpretacji Nowego Testamentu – przez pryzmat ekologii integralnej, odpowiadając na zidentyfikowaną lukę w systematycznych badaniach stosujących perspektywę ekologiczną do tekstu biblijnego. Opierając się na niedawnych badaniach, artykuł zarysuje propozycję metodologii interpretacji integralnej, zaprojektowaną do odczytywania tekstów Pisma Świętego w sposób łączący troskę o środowisko z wymiarami społecznymi, ekonomicznymi i etycznymi, uzając współzależność stworzenia. Analiza przeprowadzona przy użyciu wskazanej metodologii wykazuje, że wybrane fragmenty Nowego Testamentu zawierają istotne wezwanie do bycia dobrym gospodarzem (stewardship), a ogólne przesłanie Nowego Testamentu jest zgodne z założeniami ekologii integralnej. Praca wskazuje nowe narzędzie interpretacyjne wz bogacające istniejące podejścia. Uznając starożytny kontekst tekstów oraz wyzwania związane z dominacją relacji Bóg–człowiek w Nowym Testamencie, badania podkreślają zasadność i owocność

metody integralnej w odkrywaniu znaczenia ekologicznego i dostarczaniu bodźca do nawrócenia ekologicznego.

Słowa kluczowe: Nowy Testament, Ekologia Integralna, Hermeneutyka Ekologiczna, Interpretacja Biblijna, Ekoteologia

1. The ecological imperative and the quest for an integral hermeneutic

The contemporary ecological crisis, encompassing climate change, biodiversity loss, and widespread pollution, presents an urgent and multifaceted challenge to humanity.¹ This crisis is increasingly recognised not merely as a series of discrete environmental problems, but as a complex phenomenon deeply intertwined with social, economic, ethical, and spiritual dimensions.² Such an understanding necessitates a critical re-evaluation of the foundational narratives and ethical frameworks that have historically shaped human-earth relations. Within this global discourse, religious traditions, and specifically Christian theology, are called upon to engage their sacred texts in search of wisdom and guidance for a more sustainable and just future.³

The Bible, a text of profound cultural and religious influence, has been a central focus of this re-evaluation. Lynn T. White Jr.'s (1967) significant essay, *The historical roots of our ecologic crisis*, sparked a critical debate by suggesting that certain interpretations of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, particularly those emphasising human dominion over creation (Genesis 1:28), may have contributed to an anthropocentric worldview

1 See Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Climate change 2023: Synthesis report. Contribution of working groups I, II and III to the sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, IPCC, Geneva 2023; Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), *Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services*, IPBES Secretariat, Bonn 2019.

2 Cf. S. McDonagh, *On care for our common home, Laudato si': The encyclical of pope Francis on the environment*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll (NY) 2016, pp. 15–25.

3 Cf. *Christianity and ecology: Seeking the well-being of earth and humans*, eds. D. T. Hessel, R. R. Ruether, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2000, p. XXXV.

conducive to environmental exploitation.⁴ Whilst White's thesis has been extensively debated and nuanced by subsequent scholarship,⁵ it undeniably catalysed the development of ecotheology and ecological hermeneutics. These fields strive to critique ecologically detrimental interpretations and to retrieve or construct scriptural readings that affirm the intrinsic value of creation and humanity's call to responsible stewardship.⁶

A significant conceptual development in this area is "integral ecology," a framework prominently articulated by Pope Francis (2015) in the encyclical *Laudato si'* (LS). Integral ecology posits that "everything is closely interrelated" (LS 137) and that environmental and social crises are inseparable, stemming from shared roots in flawed ethical paradigms, unsustainable economic models, and fractured relationships—among humans, and between humanity and the wider creation (LS 49, 91). This article seeks to present a novel approach to interpreting the New Testament specifically through the lens of integral ecology. It addresses an identified historical lacuna in systematic studies applying this particular perspective to the entirety of the New Testament corpus. Informed by recent eco-hermeneutical works, especially a scholarship, which has meticulously studied and applied such a methodology, this article will outline the proposed integral interpretation, discuss its potential findings, and consider its contribution to the ongoing development of biblical ecotheology.⁷

4 L. T. White Jr., *The historical roots of our ecologic crisis*, "Science" 155 (1967) no. 3767, pp. 1205–1207.

5 Cf. C. E. Eco-theology, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 2008, pp. 35–42; N. C. Habel, *Introducing the earth Bible*, in: *Readings from the perspective of earth*, ed. N. C. Habel, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 2000, pp. 25–37 (*The Earth Bible*, 1).

6 Cf. D. G. Horrell, *The Bible and the environment: Towards a critical ecological biblical theology*, Equinox, Sheffield 2010, pp. 1–20.

7 See A. Ziemińska, *Ekologiczna perspektywa Nowego Testamentu: w kierunku interpretacji integralnej*, Tyniec Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów, Kraków 2024, pp. 15, 73–80 (Ancilla Verbi, 21).

2. The identified lacuna: Integral ecology and New Testament scholarship

Whilst ecological hermeneutics has made considerable advances, particularly in relation to Old Testament texts with their explicit creation narratives and land-based theologies, the New Testament has often been perceived as offering fewer direct resources for ecological reflection.⁸ Traditional New Testament scholarship has tended to prioritise soteriological, Christological, and ecclesiological themes, sometimes leading to a relative neglect of the cosmic scope of God's redemptive work or the intrinsic value of non-human creation.

Recent eco-hermeneutical scholarship, however, has identified a historical gap in systematic studies applying this integral ecological perspective to the New Testament corpus. Whilst individual New Testament passages or themes have received ecological attention, a methodologically consistent and holistic integral reading applied systematically across the diverse writings of the New Testament has been less developed. Many existing works that touch upon the New Testament and ecology are often collections of essays employing varied hermeneutical keys, rather than presenting a unified, systematic integral methodology.

The importance of addressing this lacuna is underscored by the very nature of the contemporary crisis, which, as integral ecology insists, is interconnected. David G. Horrell, in his call for a "critical ecological biblical theology," also highlights the need for nuanced hermeneutical approaches that can engage the Bible's diverse traditions in an ecologically responsible manner.⁹ Applying an integral lens—one that actively seeks the connections between environmental degradation, social injustice, economic models, and ethical frameworks—to the New Testament represents a crucial, yet hitherto still underdeveloped, area of academic inquiry.

⁸ Cf. R. Bauckham, *The Bible and ecology: Rediscovering the community of creation*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 2010; T. E. Fretheim, *God and world in the Old Testament: A relational theology of creation*, Abingdon Press, Nashville (TN) 2005, pp. 68–87.

⁹ Cf. D. G. Horrell, *The Bible and the environment*, pp. 129–154.

3. Outlining a methodology for integral interpretation

The novel approach to interpreting the New Testament has developed a specific methodology for integral interpretation. This methodology is designed to read New Testament texts in a way that connects environmental concerns with their concomitant social, economic, and ethical dimensions, acknowledging the interconnectedness of all creation.

The core tenets of this proposed methodology include:

- **A foundation in integral ecology:** The approach is explicitly grounded in the principles of integral ecology, which understands that environmental and social well-being are inextricably linked. It acknowledges the profound interdependencies between the divine, human, and non-human dimensions of reality (LS 66). This perspective posits that all aspects of creation are interconnected and that care for the natural environment is inseparably linked with other manifestations of human life, such as social justice, sustainable development, or peace.¹⁰
- **Holistic and contextual reading:** The methodology advocates for a holistic engagement with New Testament texts, moving beyond the selection of isolated „green” verses. It seeks to understand how broader theological narratives, ethical teachings, and cosmological assumptions within the New Testament, when read through an integral lens, yield ecological insights. Crucially, this is done with sensitivity to the ancient context of the texts, avoiding anachronistic impositions of modern ecological categories.¹¹
- **Systematic application across corpora:** Unlike ad-hoc ecological readings, this methodology is intended for systematic application across the diverse literary forms of the New Testament (Gospels, Pauline epistles, Catholic letters, Johannine literature, Apocalypse), seeking to identify overarching themes and a coherent, albeit complex, message. This systematic approach aims to move

¹⁰ Cf. J. Gocko, *Ecology and justice: From environmental justice to integral ecology of “Laudato si”*, “*Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae*” 22 (2024) no. 1, p. 75.

¹¹ Cf. A. C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An introduction*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids (MI) 2009, pp. 450–465.

towards integral interpretation, as a guiding principle for a comprehensive ecological reading.

- **Interdisciplinary openness:** Whilst rooted in biblical exegesis, the methodology is open to insights from contemporary ecological sciences, social ethics, and economic critiques, which can help to frame pertinent questions for the ancient texts and illuminate their contemporary relevance.
- **Focus on interconnected relationships:** A central aim is to explore how the New Testament portrays the interconnectedness of key relationships: the relationship with God, with fellow human beings (particularly the poor and marginalised), and with the broader created order. It investigates how these relationships are understood to be fractured by sin and injustice, and how they are envisioned as being restored or reconciled through Christ. This involves considering the „three fundamental relationships” – God-humanity, God-creation, and humanity-creation – and their portrayal within the New Testament narrative.¹²

This methodological framework, therefore, seeks to provide a robust and nuanced tool for discerning the New Testament’s contribution to an integral understanding of creation and human responsibility. It is presented as a way to navigate the complexities of the biblical text in a manner that is both faithful to its historical context and responsive to contemporary ecological and social urgencies.

4. Analysis and findings: The New Testament through an integral ecological lens

The application of this integral interpretation methodology to the New Testament, as undertaken in the eco-hermeneutical scholarship informing this article, indicates that selected New Testament passages reveal a significant call to stewardship, and suggests that the overarching

¹² Cf. R. A. Gahl Jr., *The theological mind of “Laudato si”*, “Homiletic & Pastoral Review” 27.06.2015, <https://www.hprweb.com/2015/06/the-theological-mind-of-laudato-si/> (May 10, 2025); J. K. Przybyłowski, *Antropologia katolicka w perspektywie ekologicznej. Studium pastoralne w świetle encykliki “Laudato si”*, “Collectanea Theologica” 89 (2019) no. 2, pp. 137–157.

message of the New Testament is consonant with the principles of integral ecology, particularly in its social emphases.

Key findings emerging from such an analysis include:

- **Cosmic Christology and universal reconciliation:** Pauline texts, such as Colossians 1:15–20, are central. Christ is presented not only as the agent of creation („in him all things were created”) but also as the one through whom God intends „to reconcile to himself all things (τὰ πάντα), whether on earth or in heaven.” This cosmic scope of reconciliation suggests that God’s redemptive plan encompasses the entire created order, not merely humanity.¹³ Similarly, Romans 8:19–23, which speaks of „creation (κτίσις) waiting with eager longing” for liberation, is interpreted as referring to the non-human material world, which shares in the hope of eschatological renewal.¹⁴ In this cosmic dimension, one can suggest that the Pauline understanding of salvation inherently involves the restoration of all created reality.¹⁵
- **The Kingdom of God as renewed creation:** The Synoptic Gospels’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God is understood not merely as a spiritual or future reality but as a transformative force breaking into the present, with implications for the restoration of shalom (peace, wholeness) to all creation. Jesus’s parables, often drawing on natural imagery, and his ministry of healing are seen as inaugurating this renewal.¹⁶ The eschatological vision of „a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1) is interpreted as the ultimate transformation and glorification of the existing cosmos.¹⁷
- **Incarnational theology and the value of materiality:** The affirmation in John 1:14 that „the Word became flesh (σάρξ)” is seen as

¹³ Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *The epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A commentary on the Greek text*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids (MI) 1996 , pp. 102–109 (New International Greek Testament Commentary).

¹⁴ Cf. D. J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids (MI) 1996, pp. 511–515 (New International Commentary on the New Testament).

¹⁵ Cf. D. G. Horrell, C. Hunt, C. Southgate, *Greening Paul: Rereading the apostle in an age of ecological crisis*, Baylor University Press, Waco (TX) 2010, pp. 85–106.

¹⁶ Cf. R. Bauckham, *The Bible and ecology*, pp. 125–145.

¹⁷ Cf. D. J. Moo, *Nature in the new creation: New Testament eschatology and the environment*, „Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society” 49 (2006) no. 3, pp. 470–481.

a profound divine validation of the material world. God's entry into the created order through Christ confers inherent dignity upon it, countering any dualistic tendencies that would devalue the physical in favour of the spiritual.¹⁸

- **Ethical imperatives and eco-social justice:** The New Testament's emphasis on love, justice, and care for the poor (e.g., Matthew 22:37-40; Luke 4:18-19; James 2:1-7) is understood to have intrinsic ecological dimensions. Given that environmental degradation disproportionately affects the vulnerable, the call for social justice is inherently a call for eco-justice. The critique of greed (Luke 12:15) and unsustainable lifestyles is also pertinent. Recent scholarship highlights that New Testament ethical imperatives concerning care for fellow humans, especially the poor, are crucial components of the social dimension of integral ecology.¹⁹
- **A call to stewardship:** Across various texts (that root in Old Testament's story of creation), an integral reading discerns a call to responsible stewardship, reinterpreted not as anthropocentric domination but as loving care and co-participation with God in sustaining the intricate web of life. This involves moving beyond a simple „either-or” between human well-being and the good of nature, towards an understanding of their interdependence.

These findings suggest that the New Testament, when approached with an integral ecological hermeneutic, offers significant theological resources for understanding and responding to the contemporary crisis. The overarching message, as discerned through this lens, is one of God's comprehensive care for all creation and a call for human beings to participate in that care.

¹⁸ Cf. C. E. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-theology*, pp. 145-165.

¹⁹ Cf. M. Ostrowski, *Ochrona życia człowieka w mieście. Refleksja nad wybranymi problemami encykliki papieża Franciszka "Laudato si"*, "Polonia Sacra" 23 (2019) no. 1, pp. 127-145; A. Ziemińska, *Ekologiczna perspektywa Nowego Testamentu*, pp. 325, 328.

5. Contribution to biblical ecotheology and the impetus for ecological conversion

This approach to New Testament interpretation makes a significant contribution to the development of biblical ecotheology by proposing a novel interpretive tool that augments existing hermeneutical strategies.

- **Enriching ecotheological discourse:** It brings the New Testament more fully and systematically into conversation with ecotheological concerns, providing a Christologically and eschatologically informed perspective that complements Old Testament creation theologies. This allows for a more comprehensive biblical understanding of creation care, moving beyond a perception of the New Testament as primarily focused on human salvation abstracted from its material context.
- **Providing a methodological framework:** The integral interpretation methodology offers a structured approach for scholars and interpreters, moving beyond ad-hoc readings to a more holistic and systematic engagement with New Testament texts on ecological and eco-social issues. It offers a way to navigate the texts' complexities while remaining attentive to their potential ecological relevance.
- **Strengthening the theological basis for action:** By demonstrating a fundamental consonance between the New Testament message and the principles of integral ecology, this approach offers a robust theological grounding for „ecological conversion” (LS 217–221). This conversion entails a transformation of worldview, leading to a renewed sense of responsibility and interconnectedness with all creation.²⁰ Understanding that care for creation is not an ancillary concern but is woven into the fabric of the Good News can provide a powerful impetus for transformative action.
- **Navigating hermeneutical challenges:** The methodology acknowledges and seeks to navigate the ancient context of the texts and the challenges presented by the predominant focus on the God-human relationship in the New Testament. It does so not by

²⁰ W. Pieja, Godność osoby ludzkiej podstawą odpowiedzialności za ekologię w „Laudato si” i „Fratelli tutti”, „Polonia Sacra” 26 (2022) no. 2, pp. 203–216.

imposing modern agendas anachronistically, but by discerning underlying values and theological trajectories that resonate with contemporary integral ecological concerns. For instance, it explores how the primary God-human relationship in the New Testament has profound implications for human-creation and God-creation relationships, rather than viewing them as mutually exclusive foci. The aim is to show the viability and fruitfulness of the integral method in discerning ecological meaning despite these challenges.

The mentioned viability and fruitfulness of the method is demonstrated by its capacity to uncover layers of significance that might be overlooked by hermeneutical approaches not attuned to these integral connections. It allows the New Testament to be heard as a call not only for individual salvation but also for the healing and reconciliation of the entire created order, providing a powerful impetus for both theological reflection and transformative praxis.

6. Conclusion: The enduring relevance of the New Testament for an ecological age

Charting a path for an integral ecological interpretation of the New Testament is an essential task for contemporary biblical scholarship and Christian theology. This article has outlined such a novel approach, which addresses an identified lacuna in systematic studies and offers a fruitful way to engage New Testament texts in light of the profound ecological and social challenges of our time.

The proposed integral interpretation methodology, by emphasising the interconnectedness of environmental, social, economic, and ethical dimensions, facilitates a reading of the New Testament that reveals its significant, albeit often implicit, resources for an ecological worldview. Analysis undertaken using this methodology indicates that the New Testament's core message—encompassing its cosmic Christology, its vision of the Kingdom of God, its ethical imperatives, and its eschatological hope—is fundamentally consonant with the principles of integral ecology. This provides a robust theological foundation for Christian engagement in creation care and advocacy for eco-social justice.

Whilst acknowledging the inherent challenges of interpreting ancient texts for contemporary concerns, the integral method proves to be a viable and enriching tool. It does not seek to find simplistic answers to complex modern problems but rather to uncover enduring values, theological principles, and a call to conversion that can orient believers towards a more responsible and compassionate relationship with God, one another, and the entire community of creation. The journey towards a fully articulated integral ecological hermeneutic for the New Testament is ongoing, but the path charted thus far demonstrates its profound potential to illuminate the enduring relevance of these sacred texts for fostering a more just and sustainable world.

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