

Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Rabbi Leo Dee. *Eco Bible Volume 1: An Ecological Commentary on Genesis and Exodus*. The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development, 2020. 231 pages, \$15. *Eco Bible Volume 2: An Ecological Commentary on Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*. The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development, 2021. 265 pages, \$15.

“Is concern for environmental stewardship external to the Hebrew Bible (Torah to be specific), or a central message embedded within it?” (*Volume 1*, xv)

Holding this guiding question, editors Neril and Dee creatively guide a discussion on the five books of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, with particular attention to ecology. Written with the dire context of the global pandemic and alarming environmental crises, *Eco Bible Volumes 1* and *2* show how these crises are interconnected and how the Bible is relevant to the present moment. Neril and Dee, in conversation with over 100 rabbis and Jewish thinkers, are convinced that both religion and science together can inspire people to engage ecological challenges and move people of faith to action--everywhere around the globe.

The commentaries are organized by verse, though not every verse is commented on. The use of thematic titles guides readers to think ecologically; for example, the title “sustainability and spiritual awareness” precedes commentary on Genesis 1:3 (*Volume 1*, 4). Over 100 themes are illuminated across 50 chapters of Genesis, including insights from a range of rabbis, including Jonathan Sacks’ “the stewardship paradigm,” a commentary on Genesis 2:15 (*Volume 1*, 11). *Volume 1* also includes Midrash, a major rabbinic commentary on the Hebrew Bible. Knowing that the Midrash “plays” with the Hebrew meaning of words and ventures into its unconventional areas of interpretation, powerfully expands the hermeneutical horizons of the reader (*Volume 1*, 183).

In *Volume 2*, Neril and Dee artfully engage readers as they delve into presumably uninspiring texts and show how they are relevant to contemporary life, particularly regarding the task of living sustainably. Focusing on Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the writing contributors assert that hundreds of verses on animal sacrifices in Leviticus derive from a deep care for and desire to protect animals. Many verses in Numbers deal primarily with how to live in the wilderness, while one of the main teachings of Deuteronomy is closely related to matters regarding the “land” upon which the people of Israel will soon settle. The commentaries on these three books in the Torah powerfully demonstrate how human and animal lives are intertwined and interdependent. Passages such as Numbers 22:28 – the words of Balaam’s donkey – are reclaimed with refreshing insights, turning attention to interspecies communication, in this case (103). Topics such as soil quality, land rest, and water awareness, drawn from Scripture, offer new possibilities for teaching, preaching, and learning. Furthermore, the commentaries are ripe with sermon examples and illustrations.

Throughout both volumes, Neril and Dee offer “Suggested Action Items.” These practical suggestions invite readers into practices that support ecological awareness, care and protection. For instance, preachers who desire to engage the natural world in their biblical and homiletical exegesis might daily attend to the elements of our planet, such as the warmth of the sun; the ground beneath our feet; or the scattered stars (19). The action items are also instructive for the congregations who seek spiritual disciplines that may address ecological problems. By simply unplugging electric appliances before Shabbat, one may participate in the work of ecological responsibility (172). Other action items include looking at the clouds, appreciating their shapes, colors, and speeds, and considering cloud cover as part of the health of the planet (176).

Preachers who want to deepen their reading of Torah and find ways to speak from ecological perspectives will want these volumes. They are an excellent resource for anyone who seeks to interpret the Bible with an ecological lens, and to do so while learning with and from Jewish scholars, thinkers, and practitioners. A notable strength of this set is its engagement with a 3500-years-old Jewish tradition of interpretation, citing 160 commentaries on the Hebrew Bible, in addition to referring to the most recent scientific sources. The writings travel across time helping readers to hear the voices of the past, voices that call out to the dormant ears of today to wake up and pay attention to their world as well as to their faith. Finally, both *Eco Bible* volumes generously provide additional information. *Volume 1* lists bibliographical details of Jewish scholars and teachers throughout the ages; in a similar vein, *Volume 2* lists suggestions for further reading for Jewish scholarly work on Jewish teachings on animals, creation, trees, land, ecology, veganism and vegetarianism.

The authors of *Eco Bible* urge readers to become responsible and faithful stewards, and protectors of what many suggest is a planet on the verge of collapse. The two-volume commentary is a spring of ecological wisdom from our Jewish ancestors in faith. While God is the ultimate source of life that replenishes the drying planet, it is this God revealed in Scripture who summons us to join in the life-saving act of protecting our world.

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