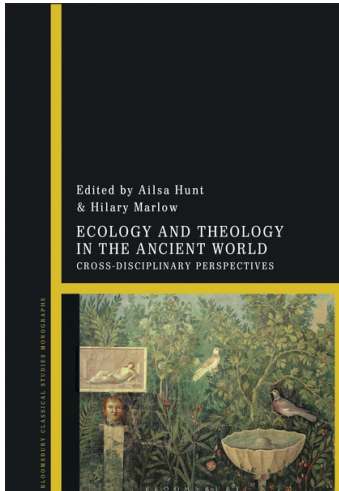


## ECOLOGY AND THEOLOGY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD




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HUNT, ALISA and MARLOW, HILARY F. (eds.) (2019). *Ecology and Theology in the Ancient World. Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 216 pp., 100,97€ [ISBN 978-1-3500-0406-1].

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“HOW THE RESOURCEFULNESS OF DEADLY LUXURY HAS INCREASED”, grumbled Seneca the Younger in the *Natural Questions* (III 18, 3, tr. Hine) – a sentiment likely to resonate with students and critics of the Anthropocene’s enveloping global crisis of unchecked consumerism and rampant environmental devastation. Brought together under the careful editorial eye of Ailsa Hunt and Hilary Marlow, the ten chapters of *Ecology and Theology in the Ancient World. Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives* put ancient Mediterranean texts into conversation with the 21<sup>st</sup> cent. climate crisis. Faithful to the ecological sensibility that threads through the various contributions, the volume as a whole is sensibly proportioned; each essay serves just enough food to satisfy the reader’s appetite.

The justification for the volume’s pairing of ecology and theology as orientating concepts is laid out clearly and well in the editors’ introduction. Although some read-

ers might lift an eyebrow at the claim that “inhabitants of the ancient world ... understood, in a way that we have forgotten, where their food came from and recognized the importance of the agrarian cycles of planting and harvesting” (p. 2; for more on the presumed *we* of the volume see below), the introduction’s call to cross-disciplinary exchange and its commitment to sturdy definitions are energizing. For the editors, the absence of any consistent recognition of anthropogenic environmental change in ancient authors – a consequence of the fact that “there was no ancient environmental crisis on which to reflect” – does not void their texts of relevance to contemporary debates; if anything, these texts “could be just the kind of catalyst needed to prompt modern audiences” to radical transformation (p. 7). As one argument for the volume’s cross-join of biblical and Greco-Roman texts, Hunt and Marlow locate in the differing arcs of their respective modern receptions an appealing opportunity: “Classicists and philosophers will likely always have to argue harder for the contemporary relevance of the texts they study to our environmental crisis than do biblical scholars and theologians speaking to pre-existing communities of readers of these ancient texts, who are keen to apply them to their own lived situation. [...] [But] those scholars who work on classical texts ... could usefully harness some of that urgency and energy, which stems from a confessional engagement with the texts, to further debate about a crisis in which we are all implicated...” (p. 9).

The volume’s ten chapters answer the editorial summons by canvassing a range of biblical and Greco-Roman texts for greater insight into ancient paradigms of ecology and/as theology. After an opening chapter that works political theory into a comparative discussion of Hebrew and Greco-Roman texts (disclosure: its author, Melissa Lane, is my colleague at Princeton) and an arresting ecocritical study of the *Sibylline Oracles* (Helen Van Noorden), the next four chapters wax philosophically: comparison of James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis with Empedoclean and Platonic models of cosmic self-sufficiency (David Sedley); the question of whether and with what benefits Stoic virtue ethics can be leveraged for contemporary environmental ethics (Christoph Jedan, Julia Wildberger); and the reception and renegotiation of ancient philosophical and religious texts in modern and postmodern responses to environmental change (Robin Attfield). Of the final four chapters, two prioritize the Hebrew Bible, the first with an eye on human concern with and fear for the sea (Rebecca Watson) and the second with an eye on warfare’s ecological toll as a theme in ancient and modern poetry (Hilary Marlow). The remaining two chapters execute, respectively, a detailed appraisal of the *Oresteia*’s Erinyes as bellwethers of disruption to the cosmic order (Emmanuela Bakola); and a point-by-point takedown of the ascription of pagan animism to Greeks and Romans in modern scholarship on ancient Mediterranean religion (Ailsa Hunt).

In its scope and depth, the collection will nourish and embolden ecologically minded students of antiquity. Lane's recovery of "the submerged role of politics" in texts ostensibly concerned with divine and human agency in nature rewards multiple readings, and Jedan's assessment of the "prospects of drawing inspiration from Stoicism for an environmental virtue ethics" should find a home in conversations among scholar-activists looking to ancient Greco-Roman philosophy as a renewable resource. These and several other chapters make for boon-companions to a fellow 2019 publication: *Antiquities Beyond Humanism* (eds. Emanuela Bianchi, Sara Brill, and Brooke Holmes), whose regard for the cosmological architectures of ancient biopolitics has multiple points of contact with Hunt and Marlow's volume. It would be a gratifying exercise to press further Sedley's attention to self-sufficiency by taking up James Porter's account of the hyper-object in *ABH*, especially since both scholars make productive use of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. But of all of the chapters in Hunt and Marlowe, I found myself most stirred by Watson's suggestive meditation on the figure of Leviathan in Job 40.25-41.26 [41.1-34], a text that celebrates "this awesome creature as part of God's paradoxical and incomprehensible world" (p. 97). From this and other passages that center the sea and sea creatures, Watson spins a convincing and timely case for "the Old Testament sense of human finitude before creation" as "one that urgently needs to be recaptured" (p. 100). Even though *Moby-Dick* towers in the shadows here, my mind kept wandering to the thalassic encounters of those 21<sup>st</sup>-century migrants for whom ecology's confrontation with theology is lashed to the racial violence of the Global North. The poet Abdel Wahab Yousif's prophecy of his own death – "You'll die at sea" – is fulfilled time and again in the same seas that the mythic Leviathan once haunted.<sup>1</sup>

The seeming heterogeneity of the volume's individual chapters is underpinned by a set of unifying concerns. Many of the authors respond to and move against Lynn White Jr.'s lecture "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (*Science* 1967), a foundational text for Euro-American environmental ethics and philosophy. Meanwhile, in the Stoic-infused chapters, a few philosophical texts come in for repeat visits, such as the excerpt from Chrysippus' *On Ends* that is preserved at Diogenes Laertius VII 87-88 (compare pp. 58-59 and p. 82). But seeing as most of the essays read as standalone submissions, it is not easy to tell how much pollination took place after the conference at which the seeds for this volume were first planted; cross-references

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1. For the poet Abdel Wahab Yousif (Latinos), see <https://arablit.org/2020/08/27/trading-misery-for-death-the-tragic-death-of-a-sudanese-poet/>.

among the essays are few in number. All the same, the essays do for the most part complement each other well.

No volume could do full justice to ecology's play with theology in the ancient Mediterranean. That the Stoics are such rock stars is hardly a surprise, but it is startling to see the environmental ethics of Epicureanism receiving only a brief mention (on p. 78; for a sense of the possibilities here see Hutchins, R. (2017). Interspecies Ethics and Collaborative Survival in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. In Schliephake, C. (ed.) (2017). *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity*. Lanham: Lexington Books). Oddly for a collection that is so attentive to theology, little space is set aside for theology's materialization in cult, and for the thinking-through of theology through the lived rhythms of ritual. And the volume's pronounced emphasis on texts closes the door to any meaningful engagement with material culture. One result is that debates about the Anthropocene now under way in classical archaeology and ancient history (see e.g. Kearns, C. [2017]. Mediterranean Archaeology and Environmental Histories in the Spotlight of the Anthropocene. *History Compass*, 15, e12371) do not register in these pages. Another consequence is that classical art historians for whom questions of material form and mediality offer points of entry into ancient ecological thinking (I am thinking of Platt, V. [2017]. Ecology, Ethics, and Aesthetics in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*. *Journal of the Clark Art Institute*, 17, pp. 219-242) might not find much of a foothold here.

Yet perhaps the most regrettable omission from the volume concerns race and race theory: the contributions do not enter into dialogue with work on the coupling of ecological and racial thinking in antiquity (as modeled in e.g. Futo Kennedy, R. and Jones-Lewis, M. [eds.] [2016]. *The Routledge Handbook of Identity and the Environment in the Classical Medieval Worlds*. London: Routledge) or on the racial and race-making underpinnings of global climate change's fast and slow violences (most recently: Yusoff, K. [2018]. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press). The concept of the Anthropocene is controversial, and not only for the reasons flagged by the editors (p. 153 n. 1): Black and Indigenous scholars have mounted forceful criticisms of its value as an explanatory tool on the grounds that European settler-colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade have driven and kept many communities on the ecological brink for centuries. Hence the call of Kyle Whyte (Potawatomi) and others to "decolonize the Anthropocene" ([2017]. Indigenous Climate Change Studies. *English Language Notes*, 55.1, pp. 153-162), a term more indexical of "Euro-Western theories of resilience" in which "the climate acts as a blank commons" than of Indigenous ecological thinking (Todd, Z. [2016]. An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29.1, pp. 4-22). Related to this constraint on the book's theoretical range

was another head-scratcher: throughout the volume, not one of the essays entertains the possibility that ancient worlds existed outside of the biblical and Greco-Roman Mediterranean; or that there could be eco-theological practices for inhabiting within and entering into responsible relationships with the environment that derive their force from destabilizing the fixation of the white-supremacist Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment order with the quarrel between “ancient” and “modern.”

But it would be invidious to carp for much longer about this volume’s deficits when I found myself so replenished by its essays. I join the editors in hoping that the volume spurs a much wider-ranging and inclusive conversation among knowledge practitioners within and outside of the academy about the histories of ecology’s braiding with theology – and especially about those interpretive approaches, mostly sidelined to date in the work of classicists, that invite us to practice more strenuously an eco-theological ethic of care.