
As its title suggests, Courtney Catherine Barajas’s *Old English Ecotheology: The Exeter Book*, locates an Old English ecotheology at the heart of the Exeter Book, the first anthology of English poetry. In order to build this argument, Barajas’s ‘Introduction: Early Medieval Earth Consciousness’, turns to the homilies of two English theologians writing at the turn of the millennium: Ælfric of Eynsham and Wulfstan of York. Ælfric and Wulfstan engage with apocalyptic concerns—widespread in late-tenth and early-eleventh century England—in their homilies by articulating a theology in which the entire Earth community of humans and other-than-humans participate in a divinely-ordained cycle of environmental creation, destruction, and restoration. For Barajas, Ælfric and Wulfstan espouse an ‘early medieval Earth consciousness’ that finds poetic expression in the Exeter Book, a manuscript especially interested in the patterns and forces of the natural world. While Barajas does not claim the Exeter Book to be interested in the apocalyptic concerns of Ælfric and Wulfstan, by drawing attention to its provenance as a donation by Leofric, Bishop of Exeter, sometime before 1072, she places the Exeter Book in historical proximity to Ælfric and Wulfstan’s writings and adjacent to their theological forecasts of an Earth community in the midst of environmental creation, collapse, and renewal.

Before examining the Exeter Book, Barajas engages the early medieval Earth consciousness of Ælfric and Wulfstan with the tenets of ecotheology. Chapter 1, ‘Old English Ecotheology’, overviews ecotheology as a contemporary Christian theological movement that seeks to redress the charge that theosophical texts of medieval Christianity understood the earth to be a resource made for the purpose of human exploitation and, consequently, that Christianity is responsible for modern environmental exploitations and crises. Barajas turns to the Earth Bible Project, a scholarly series developed by a group of ecotheologians from Australia that re-reads biblical texts according to six ecojustice principles. Barajas outlines each of these six ecojustice principles in relation to moments in Ælfric’s and Wulfstan’s Old English homilies which present the entanglement and interdependency of environmental and social crises. Barajas argues that while Ælfric and Wulfstan did not seek ‘to interrogate environmental justice in the Bible...the framework and the approach of the Earth Bible series may also be usefully applied to’ their writings such that Ælfric and Wulfstan’s homilies ‘anticipat[e] many of the tenants of modern ecotheology’ (pp. 50, 73).

In the next four chapters, Barajas extends the Old English ecotheology of Ælfric and Wulfstan to a selection of poems, and poetic genres, of the Exeter Book.
Chapter 2, ‘The Web of Creation in Wisdom Poems’, Chapter 3, ‘Identity, Affirmation, and Resistance in the Exeter Riddle Collection’, and Chapter 4, ‘Trauma and Apocalypse in the Eco-elegies’ examine gnomic verse, riddle, and elegy. In these chapters, Barajas argues that the exegetical, interpretative, and emotional openness which characterizes each of these Exeter Book genres, respectively, not only attests to the entanglements between the human and other-than-human members of the Earth community but also draws this ‘web of creation’ into view as a consequence of late-tenth and early-eleventh century apocalyptic worry. While chapters two, three, and four are concerned with how Exeter Book poems and their genres express an early medieval earth consciousness in relation to environmental-social concerns, Chapter 5, ‘Mutual Custodianship in the Landscapes of Guðlac A’, is an ecotheological response to these concerns. Barajas compares Guðlac A with Felix’s Vita Sancti Guðlací, arguing that the Old English re-telling presents Guthlac as a man who lives alone, yet part of an Earth community, where God plays an active presence in the fenland landscape. Guthlac’s battles with demons signify his fenland home as a holy, though contested, place and Barajas reads this contest as a hagiographic opportunity to present Guthlac as a figure of ‘environmental rehabilitation’ at the turn of the millennium, when ‘medieval English theologians understood environmental collapse or change to be the result of human sin’ (p. 198). Barajas concludes that Guthlac’s saintliness derives from championing an ecotheological worldview that not only recognizes God’s divine presence and goodness in the fenland landscape but also figures humans as sustained participants alongside other-than-human members of the Earth community in the ‘mutual custodianship’ of the world.

In ‘Coda: Old English Ecotheology’, Barajas suggests that the various Old English ecotheological positions raised in the Exeter Book can be models for an Earth consciousness in our contemporary moment. Likewise, she asserts that, because the Exeter Book functions as ‘a microcosm of the Old English corpus as a whole’, it ‘reveals a[n Old English] worldview which acknowledges infinite connections between human and other-than-human members of the Earth community and can support ecotheological readings of other Old English texts’ (p. 210).

Old English Ecotheology: The Exeter Book is beautiful to read and to think with. Barajas builds a portfolio of key terms, used as the lexicon for this review, important to the conceptual architecture of her book: ‘early medieval earth consciousness’, ‘Earth community’, ‘other-than-human’, and ‘web of creation’ to name a few. These expressions, which are drawn from the language of ecojustice theologies and initiatives, not only create lexical intersections between early English and modern Christian ecological theologies but moreover do away with tired conceptual signifiers like ‘environment’ and ‘nature’ such that her book rhetorically enacts an ecotheological worldview. While these ecotheological enactments are limited to the representational spaces of Exeter Book poetry—for example, I would be very interested to understand how and to what extent an Old English ecotheology might have been practiced in the Benedictine-era monastic and minster environments familiar to Ælfric, Wulfstan, and Leofric—Barajas’s book asks us to return to early English theology and consider it anew.

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