

Earth Habitat, edited by Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen

reviewed by [H. Paul Santmire](#) in the [April 24, 2002](#) issue

Topical collections of essays typically range from the barely tolerable to the merely acceptable. This is an alluring exception. *Earth Habitat's* introductory and concluding essays by the editors, Larry Rasmussen of New York's Union Seminary and Dieter Hessel, founding director of Princeton's Program on Ecology, Justice and Faith--both veterans of the struggle for a theology of global ecojustice--are worth the price of the book in themselves. All 12 essays in this wide-ranging volume have something fresh and instructive to say. Yet since the theological literature in this arena is pouring forth like an avalanche, why read this particular book? Because it deals so well with saying no and then saying yes, with moving from a prophetic to a priestly theology.

Much of the theological discussion of ecological issues in America has hitherto shied away from saying no. In the last three decades countless proposals for new theologies of nature and revised understandings of the stewardship of creation have been proffered, but all too often without much prophetic perspective. I would like to make it a rule that nobody be permitted to publish or promulgate anything in this field without first contending with the prophetic critique that all the essays in this book take for granted. It is most powerfully voiced by James Cone ("Whose Earth Is It Anyway?") and Peggy Shepard ("Issues of Community Empowerment") in their searing discussions of environmental racism. Central Harlem's rate of hospitalization for asthma is three times higher than the rest of New York City's. Why?

On the other hand, saying no is not enough if we are to get on with what many have called for repeatedly, most recently Hessel in this book: the ecological reformation of Christianity. True, given the enormous challenge the prophetic voice must address in our complacent, consumerist and racist society, it is often difficult to move from the prophetic to the priestly, from saying no to saying yes--to what Rasmussen in his introduction calls the "preservation of essential trajectories," or what Bonhoeffer thought of as cultivating "the secret discipline of faith." As Bonhoeffer knew so well,

and as almost all the contributors to this volume would agree, the church cannot live by no alone. It has to be able to claim and cultivate the yes, with abandon.

The book shows us two helpful ways to do so. First, it tells numerous stories about Christian communities around the world which are celebrating the ecological promise of the Christian faith in practice. These communities typically affirm the prophetic, but they also, as a matter of course, reach out for the priestly: in spirituality, in liturgy, in architecture and in public witness--and often do so on the basis of sophisticated biblical insights. In this respect the essays "These Stones Shall Be God's House: Tools for Earth Liturgy," by Troy Messenger, and "Seeking Eco-Justice in the South African Context" by six different authors are most instructive.

Second, *Earth Habitat* shows that turning to "the book of scripture," as well as to the more obvious "book of nature," has enormous promise. Brigitte Kahl's essay, "Fratricide and Ecocide: Rereading Genesis 2-4," especially illustrates this promise, with exegetical insights that are at once revolutionary and self-authenticating. Tired of reading one more pedestrian condemnation of how bad the Bible is for ecology? Then read this essay.

Still, more is required, a challenge that this book bequeaths us. It powerfully and necessarily says no to the injustices of our Egypts. And it says yes with sufficient passion for us to begin to imagine what a compelling priestly vision of an ecological promised land might be like. But it affords us mainly glimpses of that promise.

"The objective is to recycle/reconstruct traditional affirmations about God, Christ, Spirit, world, church, soul/body, sin and evil, redemption and the eschatological vision of New Jerusalem or New Earth, and to re-present Christian theology and ethics in ecologically alert terms," Hessel writes in his concluding essay.

Notwithstanding the exceptionally alluring witness of this volume, that objective is still very much before us. Who will produce, not another "Church Dogmatics" in the fashion of Karl Barth, but, building on the insights of volumes like this one, an "Earth Dogmatics"?