Parrēsia beyond Humankind? Exploring the Representation of the Voice of Creation in the Epistle to the Romans

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Abstract

In this article, the notion of *parrēsia*, freedom of speech, is explored with regard to the voice of (non-human) nature in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Instances from chs. 1, 8, and 11 of this letter are discussed in interaction with both the broader discourse on *parrēsia* and the newer approach of "wild pedagogies" that focuses on allowing nature to speak for itself. The exegetical findings are sobering, as it becomes clear that Paul's appeals to what can be conceptualised as the "voice of nature" in his letter are to be seen as his representation and rhetorical use of this voice primarily. This result can also serve as a reminder to be careful within the fields of eco-theology and eco-hermeneutics when it comes to appealing to the voice of nature without considering that it is often humans speaking for nature, rather than nature speaking for itself.

Keywords: ecology; Epistle to the Romans; hermeneutics; nature; *parrēsia*; Paul; wild pedagogies

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Introduction

This essay explores παρρησία, freedom of speech (and with that: the right to speak and to have a voice), in relation to non-human nature (or creation). It does so through a discussion of part of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, as this letter contains at least two and possibly three passages in which the "voice of nature" plays a vital role in the arguments presented in this influential early Christian text. The question is asked whether the "voice of nature" can be seen as exercising παρρησία, a question prompted by contemporary eco-hermeneutical and eco-theological concerns. These concerns will be outlined first, followed by a brief discussion of παρρησία, which leads into the discussion of three passages from Romans that seem appropriate for the purposes of this essay. This contribution is an exegetical experiment that seeks to make an eco-hermeneutical contribution by delving into the (representation) of the "voice of nature" in an early Christian text.

Why the Voice of Nature?

In contemporary biblical hermeneutics, interpretative ventures inspired by ecological concerns are on the rise, even if they are not necessarily paramount or typical of mainstream scholarship (yet). In such approaches, both the conceptualisation of human and non-human nature (or creation—just as much a conceptualisation as "nature") and the place of humans in the whole of the cosmos (another conceptualisation) plays an important role, and to some extent also the voice of creation. The latter is the case in two ways: one has to do with creation's praise, as it plays a role in, for example, the book of Psalms, and the other with the voice of creation when it resists or complains about its maltreatment (an interpretation sometimes given to the "groaning of creation" in Rom 8, or to aspects of creation in the Revelation of John). The question of how the voice of nature plays a role and how it can speak—a question roughly analogous to Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?"[1]—has been explored to a lesser extent, even if the issue has been highlighted by a number of scholars.[2]

Accordingly, the question of how one can "listen" to the voice of creation and then represent this voice plays an important role, at least implicitly, because human conceptualisations and representations of something like the "voice of nature" or the "voice of creation" are based on ways of looking at and listening to nature. This is problematic, given that the previous sentence in an almost self-explanatory manner privileged two senses over the others (or at least over the three other *human* senses), i.e., hearing and seeing were mentioned, but touch, smell, and taste were not mentioned.

1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313.

2 Such as recently Trees van Montfoort, *Green Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2022), 212.

This reflects the phenomenon of the hierarchy of senses, which plays out differently in different cultural contexts, yet always plays a role.

In a discipline like New Testament studies this problem is exacerbated by the fact that we are dealing with texts which are only used in a reproduced and reconstructed form (archaeological finds play a very minor role, for instance). Incidental attempts are being made to change this, most traditionally by means of excursions to the Mediterranean world (or to the "holy land"), or, for example, through experiments in "biblical cooking," both of which have produced entire industries, and a little more intentionally when it comes to a reflection on eco-hermeneutics and the senses. An example of such intentional reflections can be found in an ongoing project at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam which explores the value of "wild pedagogies" in the teaching of early Christianity/New Testament studies.[3]

Wild Pedagogies: Decentring Human Voices

"Wild pedagogies" is an approach that seeks to decentre the human subject in the process of teaching by intentionally including voices of non-human nature and a broader spectrum of senses than is commonly the case. By including other senses than those that are most dominant or intuitive for (Western) people, the aim is to create a certain consciousness concerning the way we, as (Western) humans, mainly perceive the world, namely through sight and hearing. This consciousness is a first step. A second step is the recognition that, even though a broader spectrum of senses is included, we still perceive the world as humans. We have our own hermeneutical "positionality," which prevents us from completely understanding the perspective of the "other," be it another human being or a non-human being.[4] This consciousness ideally brings about two things, namely 1) the realisation that the manner in which humans perceive and understand the world is not the only possible and correct manner: our perception of the world becomes more contingent and, thereby, less anthropocentric, and this challenges an "overabundant sense of control";[5] and 2) that it is important to learn "first hand" from non-human nature before making or consulting a (textual) representation and interpretation of non-human nature. Direct experience with non-human nature and the way it communicates is key in trying to understand the "voice" of nature, because only through actual reciprocal interaction can new meaning arise. In wild pedagogies, therefore, nature is considered to have its own agency and is seen as a co-teacher.[6]

Applying this to the discipline of New Testament studies, a typical example would be to explore Jesus's entry in Jerusalem with a real donkey, real palm branches, and a real

3 This project is part of a "seed money" grant of the Amsterdam Sustainability Institute (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) and is led by Iris Veerbeek.

4 See, for example, Van Montfoort, *Theology*, 212.

5 Marcus Morse, Bob Jickling, and John Quay, "Rethinking Relationships through Education: Wild Pedagogies in Practice," *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education* 21 (2018): 241–54.

6 Morse, Jickling, and Quay, 247–48.

sense of being outside (rather than inside a classroom). In this way, the world of the text can be approximated in a new manner; at the same time, new questions can be asked about a text, both as to what it mentions explicitly and about what it does not but might well assume. Approaches such as this go a little beyond asking what a text says about non-human nature and investigate how the voice of non-human nature is present in a text or what aspects of such nature need to be considered to understand what is being mentioned in a text.

Against this background, it is interesting to ask what sort of representation the voice of creation receives in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, especially as it contains one of the most frequently cited passages from the New Testament in eco-theology, i.e., the groaning of creation in ch. 8.

The Concept of Παρρησία

Before approaching pericopes from Paul's Epistle to the Romans, it is necessary to pay attention to the understanding of παρρησία that will be used here. Much of the recent discussion is indebted to Michel Foucault's analysis and conceptualisation of παρρησία,[7] which has done much to further the discourse on this notion. But, however sophisticated Foucault's analysis may be, there is—as always—the risk of taking the (philosophical and conceptual) analysis of a concept as a point of departure and measuring rod, rather than the use of the term in concrete contexts, in which it may be used in a much looser or less fulsome manner than when looking at Foucault's understanding of the concept.

However, Foucault's analysis of παρρησία remains an important benchmark. Wender has helpfully summarised the main dimensions of Foucault's understanding of παρρησία as follows:

> 1. Sie ist als eine spezifische Art des Sprechens zu beschreiben.
> 2. Mit ihr ist eine Art des Wahrheit-Sagens gemeint.
> 3. Der wahrheitssagende Mensch eröffnet durch die Art des Sprechens ein Risiko für sich selbst.
> 4. Dieses Risiko bedeutet, dass sich der sprechende Mensch an die Wahrheit bindet und damit sich selbst als Partner und Partnerin der Wahrheit konstituiert. Die Wahrheit ist mit einem selbst verbunden.
> 5. Die Parrhesia ist eine mutige Haltung, eine wahrhaftige Haltung.[8]

7 Developed in particular in the following translated works: Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); see also Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2001).

8 Gunda Werner, *Judith Butler und die Theologie der Freiheit* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021), 53–54. See also: Herman Westerink, "The Obligation to Truth and the Care of the Self: Michel Foucault on Scientific Discipline and on Philosophy as Spiritual Self-Practice," *International Journal of*

Because of this, παρρησία is a key expression of freedom, even its highest form:

> In dieser Wahrhaftigkeit der Rede als Verpflichtung zur Wahrheit vollzieht sich, so Foucault, die höchste Ausübung der Freiheit. Diese Freiheit besteht nun in der Selbstbindung des Subjekts an die erkannte eigene Wahrheit und ihre souveräne und mutige Äußerung.[9]

This freedom could be the freedom of an elite citizen, yet it could also be that of the (non-elite) philosopher or that of minorities, such as Jewish diaspora communities or also early Christian groups. They all could attempt to negotiate positions from which they could speak with παρρησία,[10] and the precise function of the term depended, of course, on its context.[11]

Here, the term will initially be used in a looser sense than in its Foucauldian definition, i.e., as referring to possible instances of freedom of speech in a more general sense, while its implications need to be deduced from concrete situations in which this appears to occur, rather than inferring from a (Foucauldian) synthesis of the same that all

Philosophy and Theology 81 (2020): 246–59; Stephan Goertz, "Parrhesia. Über den 'Mut zur Wahrheit' (M. Foucault) in der Moraltheologie," in *Verantwortung und Integrität heute. Theologische Ethik unter dem Anspruch der Redlichkeit*, ed. Jochen Sautermeister (Freiburg: Herder, 2013), 70–86; Christoph Schmidt, "Socrates against Christ?: A Theological Critique of Michel Foucault's Philosophy of Parrhesia," in *Religious Responses to Modernity*, ed. Yohanan Friedmann and Christoph Markschies (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 113–34.

9 Werner, *Butler*, 54.

10 For the latter example, see: Arco den Heijer, "The Performance of Parrhesia in Philo and Acts," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2022 (online first), doi:10.1177/0142064X221113930 (accessed 18 April 2023); a survey of New Testament texts (with attention to their political dimension) is offered by, e.g., Craig Hovey, "Free Christian Speech: Plundering Foucault," *Political Theology* 8 (2007): 63–81, see also David E. Fredrickson, "Free Speech in Pauline Political Theology," *Word & World* 12 (1992): 345–51. The tradition of research on παρρησία predates the work of Foucault, e.g., Stanley B. Marrow, "'Parrhēsia' and the New Testament," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982): 431–46, and is usually seen as having begun with Erik Peterson, "Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte von παρρησία," in *Reinhold-Seeberg-Festschrift I: Zur Theorie des Christentums*, ed. Wilhelm Koepp (Leipzig: Scholl, 1929), 283–97. A significant collection of essays is found in John T. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech: Studies on Friendship in the New Testament World* (Leiden: Brill, 1996). Recent key contributions to the discussion are Rainer Hirsch-Luipold, "Klartext in Bildern. ἀληθινός κτλ., παροιμία—παρρησία, σημεῖον als Signalwörter für eine bildhafte Darstellungsform im Johannesevangelium," in *Imagery in the Gospel of John. Terms, Forms, Themes and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language*, ed. Jörg Frey, Jan van der Watt, and Ruben Zimmermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 61–102, and especially Thomas Tops, *Paroimia and Parrēsia in the Gospel of John: A Historical-Hermeneutical Study* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

11 As various historical and linguistic studies have shown; see, for example, Kyriakoula Papademetriou, "The Performative Meaning of the Word παρρησία in Ancient Greek and in the Greek Bible," in *Parrhesia. Ancient and Modern Perspectives on Freedom of Speech*, ed. Peter-Ben Smit and Eva van Urk (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 15–38; see in the same volume also Nils Neumann, "Παρρησία in Erzähltexten: Handllungsschemata bei Lukian und in der Apostelgeschichte," 61–79.

dimensions present in the synthesis also need to be there in what can be understood as an instance of free speech.

Added to this is another concern: the concept of παρρησία as it occurs in Graeco-Roman antiquity (and certainly in Foucault's synthesis) is very anthropocentric, which, of course, stands to reason as he is concerned with intra-human interaction, not with the relationship between humans and non-human nature/creation. To employ his refined version of a concept that is aimed at describing and analysing the behaviour of human beings in order to study the voice of nature/creation is problematic, as it would involve a substantial amount of anthropomorphising, thereby reducing the extent to which non-human agents can "speak"—itself an anthropomorphism—for themselves.[12] Restricting oneself to a more limited definition of παρρησία as freedom of expression or claiming the freedom to express oneself may be more appropriate for the purposes of this essay.

However, in a final evaluative step, the findings of the approach through a more general understanding of παρρησία will be linked to Foucault's understanding of the same in order to tease out possible problems and complexities.

Παρρησία within Παρρησία: Representing the Voice of Nature

Another issue that needs to be addressed in advance is the fact that one is dealing with Paul's representation and his own rhetorical use of the voice of nature. The voice of nature comes to the reader only in Paul's representation and use of the same—in the context, as it were, of Paul's own exercise of παρρησία, as it has been variously studied.[13] This makes its occurrence no less interesting, but it is a factor that needs to be taken into account. In fact, one might suspect that Paul, in his own, often frank letters, in which he can well be seen as exercising παρρησία himself, appeals to the voice of nature as something that supports his own voice (and position) by speaking the truth in a free and unconstrained—as well as incontrovertible—manner. One can understand this in two ways: either Paul aligns himself with the voice of nature (leaving open the question as to how he had access to it—through his own observations, for example, or mainly through literary tropes), or he constructs the voice of nature and aligns it with his own argument. In both cases, the voices of Paul and nature become intertwined. If the latter of the two options is the case, one would have to ask whether the "voice" of nature has indeed had a chance to "speak" through Paul's words or whether Paul's words are based on his own conception and interpretation of nature's voice without it being rooted in actual interaction with it.

12 Also, the close connection between παρρησία and virtues such as courage (ἀνδρεία) would be worth considering in this context: can nature be said to be virtuous? Or is the use of such conceptuality already anthropomorphising too much?

13 See, e.g., Lexie Harvey, "Commitment to the Truth: Parrhesiastic and Prophetic Elements of Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *Res Rhetorica* 5 (2018): 21–34.

Selection of Texts from Romans

When considering the voice of nature/creation in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, following the text as presented by NA[28], a few pericopes stand out as warranting more attention and as promising interlocutors for the hermeneutical experiment conducted here. They stand out because in them, Paul seems to want to listen intentionally to the "voice of nature" or to draw on insights from nature to convey or illustrate a point he seeks to make.

First, one of Paul's most (in)famous appeals to the "voice" of nature should be mentioned; in Rom 1:20–31, the appeal to what nature tells one about the spiritual (and moral) state of affairs of the world is of paramount importance to his argument (cf. παρὰ φύσιν [v. 26] and κατὰ φύσιν [v. 21]). Second, and just as famously, Paul appeals to the "groaning of creation" (πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις συστενάζει καὶ συνωδίνει) in 8:22, part of a longer section on redemption in 8:18–23. Finally, 11:13–24 may be considered, where natural phenomena (or at least cultural phenomena involving the manipulation of nature) play an important role. What has been left out of consideration here, because the focus is on non-human nature, are texts in which Paul refers to the human body acting independently, against the wishes of the human—and certainly against the divine—spirit; the human body seems to have its own voice as well in Paul's anthropology (or it is, at least, a sounding board for either the spirit of this age or of God's spirit).[14] Some other texts might also be candidates for analysis as proposed here, for instance, the reference to the venom of vipers in 3:13, but this selection should suffice.

Nature's Παρρησία in Romans 1

Romans 1:20–31, in particular vv. 26–27, have a long and vexed history of interpretation, especially when it comes to the marginalisation, pathologising—quite literally, in fact—and criminalisation of same-sex sexuality. Here, however, the main focus is not the rhetorical point that Paul makes, but rather the manner in which the "voice of nature" plays a role. The text runs as follows:

> [26] Διὰ τοῦτο παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς πάθη ἀτιμίας, αἵ τε γὰρ θήλειαι αὐτῶν μετήλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν, [27] ὁμοίως τε καὶ οἱ ἄρσενες ἀφέντες τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν τῆς θηλείας ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους, ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι καὶ τὴν ἀντιμισθίαν ἣν ἔδει τῆς πλάνης αὐτῶν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἀπολαμβάνοντες.

The appeal to "nature" occurs in v. 26 (μετήλλαξαν τὴν *φυσικὴν* χρῆσιν εἰς τὴν παρὰ *φύσιν*) and in v. 27 (ἀφέντες τὴν *φυσικὴν* χρῆσιν τῆς θηλείας). At first sight, Paul engages in empirical theology here: he observes what occurs in nature (heterosexual sexuality). He argues that what deviates from it (homosexual sexuality) is unnatural. Nature has, then, spoken through Paul's representation of its voice, but it has spoken,

14 See Sarah Harding, *Paul's Eschatological Anthropology: The Dynamics of Human Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

nonetheless. The result of nature's voice is that homoeroticism is an indication that the world is in disarray. Can this be seen as a form of παρρησία? I would say so, as Paul appeals to the voice of nature to make a countercultural point (or so it would seem) and in league with nature speaks truth to power.

Yet on one important point this is an oversimplification. What Paul's argument does not make transparent is that he has decided at some point what is natural and what is not.[15] What Paul considers natural is, in fact, closely interwoven with, if not a direct derivative of, what he considers culturally desirable. This can be deduced from the vocabulary pertaining to honour, and especially shame, that he employs in the same verses (see the reference to πάθη ἀτιμίας in v. 26 and to τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην in v. 27); what is natural is, it would seem, that what is honourable and what is unnatural is that which is shameful. It is unlikely that social and cultural preferences determine the construction of the natural and the unnatural, and with that also the (representation of the) voice of nature. Could it be that nature is a ventriloquist for the voice of culture here? Quite a number of studies have suggested this, which can also give reason to read Paul's statements here differently, i.e., that he seeks to understand behaviour that is harmful to people as being disordered primarily (and given the context in which he lives, is compelled to use homoeroticism as an example), rather than arguing against homoeroticism as such.[16]

For thinking about the παρρησία of nature in an early Christian text (or any text for that matter), this means that an awareness of the abovementioned ventriloquism is of key importance. Not only is the voice of "nature" (or creation—in this case: nature, at least Paul uses the term φύσις, even if that does not refer to the same thing that one would understand as nature in the twenty-first century) represented by an intermediary, the human Paul in this case, the appeal to something as "nature" also requires a prior construction of nature and that determines to a very large extent how the voice of nature is shaped and what sort of communications are issued through it. Yet here the question remains: how did Paul understand the voice of "nature" (all the while constructing nature)?

The Παρρησία of Creation in Romans 8

A second text that warrants further discussion is Rom 8:18–23, which is often referred to as a text that is of particular relevance for eco-theology. It runs as follows:

> 18 Λογίζομαι γὰρ ὅτι οὐκ ἄξια τὰ παθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ πρὸς τὴν μέλλουσαν δόξαν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι εἰς ἡμᾶς. 19 ἡ γὰρ ἀποκαραδοκία τῆς κτίσεως τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν τῶν υἱῶν τοῦ θεοῦ ἀπεκδέχεται. 20 τῇ γὰρ ματαιότητι ἡ κτίσις ὑπετάγη, οὐχ ἑκοῦσα ἀλλὰ

15 Although it does not appear likely that Paul argues directly against Plato here, the latter's myth about human origins and same-sex attraction does show that it was possible to imagine what is natural quite differently indeed. See *Symp.* 189c–193e.

16 On which, see the brief discussion in Peter-Ben Smit, "Göttliche Gewalt. Macht und Machtmissbrauch in Bibel und Bibelrezeption am Beispiel von ausgewählten biblischen Texten," *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 111 (2021), 207–23 (appeared in 2023).

> διὰ τὸν ὑποτάξαντα, ἐφ᾽ ἐλπίδι 21 ὅτι καὶ αὐτὴ ἡ κτίσις ἐλευθερωθήσεται ἀπὸ τῆς δουλείας τῆς φθορᾶς εἰς τὴν ἐλευθερίαν τῆς δόξης τῶν τέκνων τοῦ θεοῦ. 22 οἴδαμεν γὰρ ὅτι πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις συστενάζει καὶ συνωδίνει ἄχρι τοῦ νῦν· 23 οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοὶ τὴν ἀπαρχὴν τοῦ πνεύματος ἔχοντες, ἡμεῖς καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς στενάζομεν υἱοθεσίαν ἀπεκδεχόμενοι, τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν τοῦ σώματος ἡμῶν.

Creation speaks through several behaviours here, or at least is presented as doing so by Paul. In fact, creation is described as longing (v. 19: ἡ γὰρ ἀποκαραδοκία τῆς κτίσεως τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν τῶν υἱῶν τοῦ θεοῦ ἀπεκδέχεται), being subdued (τῇ γὰρ ματαιότητι ἡ κτίσις ὑπετάγη, v. 20 and following), and moaning as if in childbirth: οἴδαμεν γὰρ ὅτι πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις συστενάζει καὶ συνωδίνει ἄχρι τοῦ νῦν· (v. 22). All of this functions as a further substantiation and elaboration of what Paul states in v. 18: Λογίζομαι γὰρ ὅτι οὐκ ἄξια τὰ παθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ πρὸς τὴν μέλλουσαν δόξαν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι εἰς ἡμᾶς.

What is of primary interest here is, again, if and if so, how the voice of creation (κτίσις) exercises or is presented as exercising a form of παρρησία. The answer is, again, affirmative. The voice of creation supports an uncertain and potentially controversial point that Paul is making, i.e., that the world to come is more than worth the current sufferings of the faithful, which are part of the broader suffering of creation which longs for redemption as a whole. To the extent that the longing of creation (or its groaning in the pangs of childbirth) proves anything (one has to accept Paul's take on this to understand how his appeal to the voice of creation works here), the voice of creation can be seen as having dimensions of παρρησία in that it speaks against a position that is at least just as plausible, i.e., that the world to come may not be worth all the trouble of the current age.

The voice of creation—creation is, of course, a conceptualisation of the world already—speaks here by way of Paul's pen (or rather that of his scribe—see Tertius's greetings in 16:22). Here, this has a slightly different dynamic than in ch. 1, nature—not "creation" (i.e., φύσις not κτίσις). This has to do primarily with the fact that Paul speaks about creation's communication with, presumably, humankind and God, in terms that increasingly remind us of human behaviour. While "awaiting with eagerness" (ἀπεκδέχομαι, 8:19) can be regarded as a somewhat neutral expression (I can imagine a dog waiting in such a manner to be fed, or the like), being subdued into a meaningless existence, however, as v. 20 has it (τῇ γὰρ ματαιότητι ἡ κτίσις ὑπετάγη), presupposes a distinction between a meaningful and meaningless existence that projects human, cultural categories onto creation and anthropomorphises its position. In v. 22, which refers to creation as undergoing birth pangs, this anthropomorphising reaches its climax as the voice of creation is conceptualised in human terms, taking into account who else is said to suffer such pangs in the tradition of Israel (although συνωδίνω does not occur in the corpus of the LXX, ὠδίνω does and always refers to human behaviour, never to

that of animals, even when used metaphorically; also the other verb used by Paul here, συστενάζω, or at least στενάζω and στεναγμός in the LXX, can refer to birth pangs).[17]

Although the voice of creation may exercise a form of παρρησία here, speaking the truth about a contested topic, it does so only through Paul's formulations (and Tertius's pen), and that means that creation loses its own voice—even to such an extent that it is not entirely clear what Paul is thinking of when he imagines creation groaning in labour—and speaks in the voice of human behaviour: its voice is anthropomorphised. While such an anthropomorphising is possibly inevitable when representing the voice of creation in human discourse—for instance, even the notion of "voice" is itself an anthropomorphism—it is important to be aware of it, as it means that, at least to a certain extent, the proper idiom of creation is lost and only available in translation. And translations inevitably transform, transpose, add to and subtract from what they translate.

Olive Branches in Romans 11

The final instance of a possible voice of nature in Paul's Epistle to the Romans can be found in 11:13–24, the well-known comparison of the relationship between Christ devotees from the nations and the people of Israel in terms of the grafting of the former, described as branches from a wild olive tree, on the stem of the (divinely domesticated) olive tree. In his comparison and ensuing exhortations to the believers from the nations, Paul plays with what is natural and what is not by calling the grafting of the believers from the nations as wild branches into the olive tree of Israel unnatural (and describing, imaginatively, the regrafting into the same tree of branches from that tree that had been previously removed, as something rather more natural—see v. 24: εἰ γὰρ σὺ ἐκ τῆς κατὰ φύσιν ἐξεκόπης ἀγριελαίου καὶ παρὰ φύσιν ἐνεκεντρίσθης εἰς καλλιέλαιον, πόσῳ μᾶλλον οὗτοι οἱ κατὰ φύσιν ἐγκεντρισθήσονται τῇ ἰδίᾳ ἐλαίᾳ; not all that is unnatural is bad, apparently).

What is at the forefront here as the *bildspendender Bereich*, the sphere from which Paul draws his imagery, is not so much nature as such, but rather humans' use of nature in horticulture (e.g., olive farming), even if a residual notion of what is natural and what is not is also there: grafting wild branches on a cultivated tree is not natural, whereas the combination of a tree with its own branches is.

When it comes to the question of παρρησία, it can be argued with relative ease that vis-à-vis the Romans, Paul exercises, as throughout this letter, considerable freedom of speech (and this at great length) in this section of the epistle—and attention has been drawn frequently to his ability to speak freely.[18] But what about the voice of nature? At

17 For a discussion (and survey) of these verbs, see, for instance, Laurie J. Braaten, "All Creation Groans: Romans 8:22 in Light of the Biblical Sources," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 28 (2006): 131–59.

18 On freedom of speech/παρρησία in Paul's work in general, see, for instance, Le-Chih (Luke) Hsieh, "Paul as a Parrhesiastes," *Sino-Christian Studies* (2014): 9–42; a good overview of the concept in the

least the distinction between that which is natural and what is not is used as a rhetorical pipe to beat down the Gentile believers in Rome, and in that sense, Paul employs the voice of nature to bolster his argument. Yet, nature's own behaviour hardly plays a role beyond that here. It is nature that is used by humans in a double way that is the most prominent here, that is to say: it is nature as used by humans (olive tree farmers) used by another human (Paul) in a rhetorical context (Epistle to the Romans). Although the reference is to nature, one may wonder whose voice is audible here. Or, more generally speaking, one may wonder whether there are ways of representing the voice of nature that are not always also the voice of the human beings doing the representation.

Concluding Reflection

The above considerations lead to a relatively sobering view of the voice of nature in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. What is gained from this view, however, is that it highlights some issues that may well be generalised when it comes to the role of the voice of nature in early Christian discourse (and quite possibly beyond) and that complicate the enterprise of eco-theology based on these texts. Yet, it is a way of complicating things that may well align with a key eco-theological concern, i.e., doing justice to nature or creation as a "Du" rather than as an "Es" (Martin Buber).[19]

First, it has become apparent that the voice of nature plays a role in at least three texts from Paul's long letter to the Roman Christ devotees. In different contexts and kinds of argument, Paul appeals to the way things are in nature (or creation, both kinds of terminology occur) in order to bolster or illustrate his argument (or bolster it by illustrating it). In this sense, the voice of nature indeed speaks through Paul's work. The above discussion of each of the three sections of Paul's letter also led to some complications.

Second, as became clear in each case discussed above, problems also exist. Three were identified. The first is that the voice of nature is often the voice of culture in another guise (in relation to Rom 1); the second entails that nature (or creation) is represented by means of anthropomorphisms, and accordingly is not speaking for itself or in its own voice but only in translation, as it were (in relation to Rom 8); third, it was discussed in relation to Rom 11 that nature, when it appears, is always to a certain extent "domesticated," it is nature used by humans in two typical ways: it is conceptualised (if not domesticated to a larger extent than that) by humans and used subsequently to serve

New Testament at large is still found in Marrow, "'Parrhēsia'." Also studies focusing on Paul's negotiation of his voice whilst being imprisoned can be conceptualised as a form of παρρησία, see for a recent contribution Karin B. Neutel and Peter-Ben Smit, "Paul, Imprisonment and Crisis: Crisis and its Negotiation as a Lens for Reading Philippians," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 44 (2021): 31–55. See further the literature mentioned in note 9.

19 Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2021 [1923]).

human rhetorical aims and interests. The latter also means that its own voice becomes all but inaudible.

Third, when comparing the way in which nature/creation speaks in Romans with Foucault's understanding of παρρησία, as it was paraphrased above, it becomes even more difficult to understand the voice of nature/creation in Romans as a voice that exercises παρρησία. To begin with, given that for Foucault παρρησία is the highest expression of freedom by means of which someone establishes their own relationship to the truth, it becomes very hard to understand nature's/creation's voice to be involved in anything like that. Of course, Paul presents, at least in Rom 1 and 8 and to a more limited extent in Rom 11, the natural course of things (sexual intercourse, yearning for redemption, growth of branches) as speaking for itself (all the while supporting his own argument, of course), in reality, it is not nature's voice speaking freely at all but rather Paul speaking freely with the help of his appeal to nature. The latter, nature, has been moulded to suit his rhetorical needs in this process. Παρρησία is there in Romans, but it is Paul's, not nature's.

Fourth, although the harvest for eco-theological exegesis may be rather disappointing so far, there is some gain in the above exercise, nonetheless. From this discussion of the voice of nature/creation in Paul's Letter to the Romans, a number of caveats emerge with regard to the possibilities of eco-theology based on early Christian texts, and similarly a number of pointers to ways of listening to the voice of nature in eco-theology at large. First, the caveats concern the issues of cultural ventriloquism, anthropomorphism, and domestication as they are part and parcel of human representation of the voice of nature/creation—and, given that nature/creation as it occurs in early Christian texts is always represented by humans (as the texts are human products—all these challenges must be taken into account all the time. In the Bible, the voice of nature/creation only exists in human representation (and with that in human interpretation). It does not speak for itself, which is a concern of many forms of eco-theology, i.e., to listen to nature itself. A requirement for the latter would be to develop forms of interacting with nature that are less anthropocentric and are, to a lesser extent, determined by the human subject controlling the exchange between human and non-human communication. (Eco-)theology and wild pedagogies may very well complement one another in this perspective. It might call for a thorough-going apophatic approach to creation, in which crafting one's image of creation/nature is postponed for as long as possible, or in which such images are, in an intentional exercise in iconoclasm, shattered in order to create a new form of openness for the voice of nature, allowing it to communicate in ways that are not predetermined by human agendas. It is not just "wild" approaches to nature and nature in texts that can contribute to the development of a less anthropocentric hermeneutics of the same, but, thinking reciprocally, elements of, in this case, the Christian tradition can also be used to further develop "wild" approaches. We suggest that such forms of "wild" (eco-)theology may be an example of ways for theology to move beyond anthropocentric forms of hermeneutics.

Fifth, the above engagement with Paul's references to nature/creation also give rise to reflections on what senses are involved in the perception of nature; especially the interaction with wild pedagogies increased awareness of the fact that—at least for Western readers, reading in traditions influenced by modernity—the senses of sight and hearing are privileged, even though nature itself may well communicate in manners that address other senses primarily (senses to which human beings may, for cultural reasons, pay less attention, or that are for biological reasons less developed among humans). Considering this may further a certain decentring of the normality of human perception and create space for the question of what it might mean to perceive non-human nature on its own terms. As discussed above, approaches such as wild pedagogies can facilitate at least experiments in this direction, which may well have a broader impact on New Testament hermeneutics. Can the παρρησία of nature, absent in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, be uncovered in other ways?

Note regarding Change of Affiliation

Since the writing of this article, Iris Veerbeek's affiliation has changed to the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

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