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From victimisation to restoration: Rereading Psalm 29 from the Earth perspective

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The prevailing environmental crisis necessitates shifting from anthropocentric to geocentric biblical interpretations, as traditional readings often marginalise creation. Specifically, Psalm 29 presents a theological polemic where the 'voice of the Lord' often silences the Earth through destructive power, requiring a critical re-examination of divine theophany viewed through ecojustice principles. This article interprets Psalm 29:1–11 from an Earth perspective to uncover the 'voice of the Earth' within the textual tradition. The study aims to counter ideologies that silence nature and foster alternative consciousness regarding the sustainable relationship between God, humans and the Earth. Utilising ecological hermeneutics – comprising suspicion, identification and retrieval – alongside critical spatial analysis, the research re-evaluates YHWH's storm theophany. Findings reveal that while the 'voice of YHWH' manifests as a destructive wild force against the ecosystem (Lebanon and Sirion), the hymn concludes with a counter-voice pleading for peace [*shalom*] rather than power. The text ultimately moves from the victimisation of nature to a plea for restoration.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research contributes to Old Testament theology by establishing the Earth as a subject capable of advocacy and resistance, challenging patriarchal domination of nature. It provides a fresh, geocentric angle for biblical interpretation that integrates ecojustice consciousness into theological reflection.

Keywords: Psalm 29; Earth perspective; victimisation; restoration; environmental crisis.

Introduction

This article arises from a deep-seated need to interpret Psalm 29 through an ecological lens, focusing on its significance within the framework of eco-justice. The authors aim to investigate where and how the 'voice of the Earth' manifests within this specific scriptural tradition. The term 'Earth Community' describes a holistic web of life or ecosystem where humans are integrated into a created order that cannot exist independently of the planet; both are vital members of this shared community (Laurie 2008:63). Biblical tradition further suggests that God chooses to reside among humanity and the Earth, effectively becoming a member of this Earth community (Fretheim 1984:37–39; Laurie 2008:185–203). Because this community is a symbiotic whole, any action taken to either protect or destroy life impacts every member (Laurie 2008:64). The Earth Bible Team (2001:23) suggests that the 'voice of the Earth' is clearly discernible in ancient biblical wisdom. The Earth Bible Team (2001:23) clarifies that the term 'voice' is not an attempt to anthropomorphize the planet; rather, it serves as a shorthand to denote the multimodal ways the Earth and its inhabitants communicate – via gestures, signs, images, or sounds – to humans, other life forms, or God. This perspective confirms that the Earth possesses its own language, which must be actively sought within the Old Testament.

Psalm 29 is interesting to study for several reasons, namely:

- Shifting from anthropocentrism to geocentrism: In the 21st century, theological and biblical studies have often marginalised the Earth. While the Bible might seem indifferent to environmental issues, there is a growing movement to restore the Earth's role in theological reflection (Fretheim 2005:vii). The Earth possesses an inner voice that needs to be uncovered in scripture, reflecting its specific social and ecological context (Beebe & Lachmann 2014:27–29). Habel (2008:1–2) argues that the Earth should be viewed as a subject rather than a secondary object. While biblical narratives traditionally focus on God and humanity, the story of the Earth is frequently overlooked, despite its many 'voices' – including suffering, celebration and restoration (Jähnichen 2022:5). Central to these is the voice of eco-justice, which necessitates a shift from human-centred (anthropocentric) to Earth-centred (geocentric) interpretations that identify natural perspectives hidden within the text.

- Poetic diversity and Earth as subject: Poetic literature in the Bible often shows a greater concern for the environment than is typically recognised, offering a rich variety of ecological ideas. Elements of the Earth are frequently used as ethical metaphors for human behaviour in books like Job, Proverbs and various Psalms. In the Psalms, the Earth and its members are depicted as active subjects capable of praising, rejoicing or suffering. Specifically, Psalm 29:1–11 functions as a hymn – a positive expression of worship – within this poetic tradition (Lenzi 2011:9).
- Divine sovereignty and ecological impact: From an Earth perspective, Psalm 29 is a doxology praising God as the universe's ruler. It uniquely depicts a theophany where God appears through the violent forces of a storm, exerting a power that effectively silences and damages the Earth. The text highlights a dynamic where God is the actor behind the Earth's destruction, suggesting a level of ecological injustice hidden beneath the surface of the hymn.
- The global environmental crisis: The current ecological crisis, which threatens the entire network of life, provides a pressing contextual reason for this study. This crisis is often linked to social hierarchies and human domination of nature (Bookchin 1982). Furthermore, certain patriarchal biblical texts have historically supported the domination of the Earth, necessitating a new interpretation focused on creation theology and the survival of all communities.

This study utilises ecological hermeneutics to reorient biblical interpretation by treating the Earth as a subject (Habel 2008:3–4). This method involves three stages:

- Suspicion: Reading the text with a critical eye towards anthropocentric biases that treat the Earth as a mere object.
- Identification: Developing empathy for the Earth and its community to recognise the injustices they face within the text.
- Retrieval: Recovering ecological meaning and eco-justice awareness from the text after applying suspicion and identification.

Ultimately, this research seeks to move from the author's original intent to the reader's modern perspective, transforming the interpretation of Psalm 29:1–11 into meaningful ecological insight.

To ensure this ecological reading remains grounded in the text's historical and theological intent, this study will examine Psalm 29 by integrating its literary and canonical context with an Earth-centric lens. Structurally, Psalm 29 serves as the central focal point in the palindromic arrangement of the Psalms 25–34 cluster – an editorial placement designed to assure a post-exilic community that God, the supreme Creator, has the power to suppress cosmic and political chaos. By reading the text through this dual framework, this article argues that while the theological intent of the storm theophany is to demonstrate God bringing order out of chaos, the ecological reality reveals the Earth as the silent receiver of this turbulent reordering. Ultimately, bridging the literary context with ecological hermeneutics reveals that the text's trajectory moves from the collateral disruption of nature to a concluding plea for shalom – a divine peace that encompasses the entire Earth community.

Socio-historical context of Psalm 29:1–11

Regarding the analysis of the special context of Psalm 29, the authors will use the critical spatial discipline used by Venter (2004:235–250) in the article 'Spatiality in Psalm 29'. The discipline of critical spatiality is a study that reintroduces spatiality in an ontological trialectic that includes history, sociality and spatiality (Flanagan 1999:26). Critical spatiality studies the spatial aspects of the biblical text and relates it to the socio-historical context in which the text originates. This study understands a text in three analytical spaces: firstly, the physical space; secondly, the imagined space, the way in which this space is understood and thirdly, the lived space related to the ideology of the author and the society (Matthews 2003:12). That is, critical spatial theory provides tools for socio-historical reconstruction. Spatial analysis of biblical literature can provide a window into the ancient world of the Bible (Venter 2004:1). I apply the study of physical space and living space to examine the socio-historical background, while the imagination space is to investigate the structural analysis of the text. In terms of physical space, Psalm 29 identifies specific toponyms that define the landscape of the theophany. The three places mentioned explicitly in Psalm 29 are: Lebanon, Sirion and Kadesh. These three sites are indicated as areas where God exerts the power.

Lebanon is the name for the mountain ridge in Syria. Lebanon has several geophysical characteristics. Firstly, it is almost 160 km long, which stretches from the Southwest to the Northeast. Secondly, the site is characterised by white limestone on its back and occasional snow. Because of its features, this place is called the 'white mountain'. Thirdly, the mountains of Lebanon are a direct continuation of the hills of Northern Galilee. The range is characterised by several peaks varying from 1630 m to 2600 m in elevation. Fourthly, on the West, it reaches the Mediterranean Sea, and on the East, it is flanked by the Anti-Lebanon parallel mountains, with the Biqa Valley between them (Jos 11:17) (Venter 2004:2).

Lebanon is identified with the cedar tree in Psalm 29:5. The rulers of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine used cedars and Lebanese conifers as building materials. This cedar has several symbolic meanings. Firstly, the cedar is often a symbol of majesty and power in biblical images (Jdg 9.15; 1 Ki 4.33; 2 Ki 14.9; Ps 92.12; 104.16; Is 35.2; 60.13). Secondly, the tree is a symbol of worldly pride subject to divine wrath (Is 2.13; 10.34; Jer 22.6; Ezk 31.3–14; Zch 11.1–2) (Venter 2004:2).

Mount Hermon is in the Southern part of the Anti-Lebanon mountains. The name of this site is used variously; for example, Psalm 29.6b names it Sirion, whereas the Sidonians call it Hermon 'Sirion', and the Amorites tend to use the name 'Senir' (Dt 3:9). These names were popularly used during the 14th century BC. Lebanon and Sirion are described as the origin sites of the wood for the Temple (Pritchard 1950:134a). The use of the word pairs Lebanese and Sirion is understood as a standard expression in Phoenician literature (Kraus 1966:237). Other site names mentioned together in Psalm 98:1 are Zaphon, Amanus, Tabor and Hermon. The Lebanese cedars and the great trees of Bashan are grouped together in Isaiah 2:12 (Venter 2004:2).

The Kadesh Desert is often identified as Kadesh-Barnea, an oasis in the Sin Desert and is mentioned in Psalm 29:8b. The two names, Kadesh and Kedesh, are used for cities that were ancient refuges in Canaan. In Southern Israel, Judah used the name Kadesh, while Northern Israel used the name Kedesh (Cohen 1962:1). There are several scholarly opinions about this site. Seybold (1998:99) associates the Kadesh of Psalm 29:8 with the northern landscape of Lebanon and Sirion. Seybold (1998:59) connected it to the Orontes region rather than to the wilderness of the Negeb. Kraus (1966:237) identifies Lebanon and Kadesh as two areas that are geographically opposite, but which could merge with each other as the traditional boundary markers for the northern and southern ends of Ancient Israel. The mention of Lebanon and Kadesh as a description given of the Herrschaftsbereich of the king is perhaps the international geographical identification of ancient Canaan (Kraus 1966:238). It is derived from the tradition of the high god of the kingdom. Sometimes, the Kadesh Desert is considered the southern boundary of Israel (Venter 2004:2).

Literary and canonical context of Psalm 29

To fully grasp the theological and ecological dimensions of Psalm 29, it is essential to situate the text within its broader literary and canonical landscape. Structurally, Psalm 29 serves as the central focal point in the palindromic arrangement of the cluster encompassing Psalms 25–34. This deliberate editorial placement parallels the structural roles of Psalm 8 and Psalm 19, which function as the central, anchoring psalms of their respective clusters (Ps 3–14 and Ps 15–24). Like Psalms 8 and 19, Psalm 29 is fundamentally concerned with the majesty of the Creator and the complex dynamics of God's relationship with the created order.

Within this literary framing, the psalm operates with a distinctly theocentric purpose, particularly when read from the perspective of a post-exilic community. For these early believers, who were navigating a fractured and unstable socio-political landscape, Psalm 29 was not intended to glorify the random victimisation or destruction of nature. Rather, it provided profound theological assurance. By portraying God's sovereign command over the violent storm – a pervasive ancient Near Eastern motif representing untamed chaos – the psalm declares that the supreme Creator possesses unmatched power to suppress chaotic forces.

The fierce manifestation of divine power over the natural elements (the cedars of Lebanon and the wilderness of Kadesh) stands as a testament to God's ability to bring order and stability to a turbulent political and cosmic world. Recognising this theocentric and literary context provides a crucial and necessary foundation for an ecological reading: the overwhelming upheaval of the natural world in the text is framed not as divine hostility towards creation but as a demonstration of the Creator subduing chaos. This ultimate establishment of order paves the way for the psalm's concluding vision, where God grants strength and *shalom* [peace and wholeness] to the community – a restoration that must necessarily encompass the Earth.

Retelling the Earth story in Psalm 29:1–11

In the Earth perspective, the authors identify and find two dominant voices in this text, namely wild force and a plea for the peace. This hymn begins with a demonstration of God's destructive power over the Earth and ends with a plea for peace for the Earth and its communities. In the Earth perspective, the authors will interpret Psalm 29 in three parts: firstly, the spectacular storm God; secondly, the force of the storm and thirdly, a plea for peace.

Essentially, Psalm 29 presents the theophany of God. Biblical theophanies have long been acclaimed as bold representations of God's revelation through creation or the forces of nature (Habel & Avent 2001:42). Currently, theophany is a literary topic that has received considerable attention from biblical theologians (Mowinckel 1927). This topic becomes a polemic, when examined from ecojustice principles, because it indicates the aspect of victimisation of nature by the supremacy of the power of YHWH. In this instance, a diverse range of perspectives regarding theophany manifested.

Biblical literature identifies twenty-one distinct elements of theophany, including: mountains, sacred numbers, the voice of God, human response, clouds, water, thunder, lightning, trumpet blasts, smoke, fire, earthquakes, specific terminology of the event, signs, the transformation of witnesses, altars, feasts, wind, light, darkness, and holiness (Boyer 2017:xvii). McKenzie (1965) stated that: 'one natural phenomenon with which YHWH [the LORD] is most frequently associated is the storm'. Among all the scriptural narratives depicting the splendour of the LORD, the account of Moses meeting God at Mount Sinai (also known as Horeb) is the most comprehensive, as it incorporates 19 out of the 21 distinct markers that characterise the glory of the LORD (Boyer 2017:xv). According to the bible text, these 21 markers or elements of 'theophany' include:

- Physical locations and numbers: Mountains and sacred numbers.

- Auditory and visual elements: God's voice, thunder, lightning, a trumpet blast and the presence of light and darkness.
- Environmental phenomena: Clouds, water, smoke, fire, earthquakes, wind and the general transformation of the scene.
- Human and ritual elements: The response of the people, specific terminology of the event, signs, the transformation of witnesses, an altar and a feast.

The Sinai narrative specifically highlights this divine presence through the overwhelming power of a storm – featuring heavy clouds (Ex 19:16), lightning and thunder coupled with fire (Ex 19:19), smoke and earthquakes (Ex 19:18). This intense display serves as a manifestation of the LORD's 'glory' [*kabod*], representing a level of power and authority that can both inspire awe and be destructive (Boyer 2017:2).

The biblical account depicts the LORD's majestic presence through the intense power of a storm, characterised by heavy clouds, lightning and thunder. This divine manifestation (theophany) also incorporates elements like earthquakes, fire, smoke and further thunder. In this context, the LORD's glory serves as both a symbolic sign and a source of formidable power that has the potential to either inspire deep reverence or cause total destruction. Consequently, the divine glory is dualistic: while it can elicit profound human wonder, it also possesses a terrifyingly destructive capacity.

Conventional readings of theophany typically assume that God, as the LORD of storm events, possesses the absolute right to manipulate nature for any divine purpose. In these interpretations, storm phenomena are rarely treated as valuable, integral parts of the 'Earth community'. However, from an Earth-centred perspective, several vital questions emerge: How exactly does the YHWH employ these storms, and does the natural world celebrate or suffer during such displays of meteorological power? Ultimately, through the lens of ecojustice, one must ask what the actual state of the Earth is when viewed through these accounts of divine presence (Habel & Avent 2001:42).

The spectacular storm God

Some scholars categorise Psalm 29 as the type of psalm that mainly represents a metaphor for the god of heaven (Craigie 1972:148, 1983:245; Gradi 1979:109f; Greenstein 1992:54). Habel and Avent (2001:44) delineate the linear structure of the hymn to YHWH in Psalm 29 as follows:

- Verses 1–2: An invitation to praise YHWH as the LORD of the storm.
- Verses 3–9a: A depiction of the storm god's power and activity in motion.
- Verses 9b–10: A formal acclamation and celebration of YHWH's sovereign rule.
- Verse 11: A profound petition for peace arose from the community.

From a thematic standpoint, the first two verses of Psalm 29 serve as a unique doxological introduction. These verses depict a 'heavenly liturgy', a celestial worship service marked by specific ritual terms such as 'bow down' [חוה *hithpael*] and 'in sacred vestments' [בהדרת־קדשן]. The summons to worship is directed at the 'sons of God', who represent lower-tier deities from the Canaanite tradition; in the context of Hebrew text, these figures are viewed similarly to 'angels' or the 'seraphim' described in Isaiah 6 (Barbiero 2016:385). Through an ecological lens, Habel and Avent (2001:44) argue that this prologue is a call for the entire Earth community, including Israel, to recognise the glorious presence of YHWH. Notably, the praise for YHWH's appearance in the storm originates strictly from the celestial 'sons of God' above (Habel & Avent 2001:44).

This worship occurs within a heavenly sanctuary that mirrors the earthly temple. This connection is supported by Isaiah 6, which suggests the Lord resides simultaneously in the Jerusalem temple and in heaven, reflecting an Ancient Near Eastern belief in the seamless link between the two realms (Keel 1984:151–155). The praise likely comes from a 'divine council' of heavenly beings, providing a perspective of the event from on high. The terminology employed to describe this divine arrival underscores its unrivaled majesty and grandeur. This event is portrayed not merely as a celestial display but as an 'Earth show' – a powerful manifestation of the storm god's might impacting the world below. It is a grand performance that the heavenly host watches from their vantage point in the skies (Habel & Avent 2001:44).

The central concept in this call to honour YHWH as the deity of the storm is כבוד, *kabod* [glory]. This term appears several times in the opening sections (1b, 2a and 3b). In this context, kabod signifies a divine attribute – the visible manifestation of God's power, authority and character revealed to God's people (Barbiero 2016:385). Conceptually, the term כבוד 'glory' is interpreted primarily as a divine quality, belonging to God that expresses the manifestation of God in visible signs of God's presence. The phrase 'the glory of YHWH' [כבוד יהוה] indicates the power, authority and honour of God, the revelation of his power and characteristics. This revelation is understood as the manifestation of YHWH to the people of God. The phrase 'the glory of YHWH' occurs frequently in the Old Testament, which is suggestive of his visible and active presence in the midst of his covenant people (Ex 16:7). The noun כבוד is generally used for the external appearance of splendour or wealth (Olickal 2018:122).

The term כבוד [glory] is used variously in the Old Testament. Within the Priestly (P) tradition, the 'glory' [*kabod*] of God is not a mere abstract concept but assumes the tangible, visible form of a mobile cloud infused with fire (Exod. 24:15–17; 40:34–38; cf. Lev. 9:23; 1 Kings 8:10). This imagery serves a dual purpose: the cloud veils the overwhelming brilliance of the divine presence to protect the beholder, while the fire signifies God's holiness and transformative power, signaling his localised indwelling among the Israelites

(Habel & Avent 2001:45). In the same tradition, the כבוד [Glory] is described as a visible shining splendour, which accompanies YHWH when he draws near to reveal himself to Israel (Ex 14:4,17–18; 16:10; Nm 17:7) (Budd 1984:156). In this case, the presence of כבוד יהוה [*kabod* YHWH] is often interpreted with feelings of fear, awe and amazement, as it reflects a being inherently worthy of worship and adoration (Stuart 2006:375). In the prophetic tradition, Ezekiel beholds the glory of God in its full mystery and majesty (Ezk 1:28; 3:23; 10:24) (Habel & Avent 2001:45).

In the context of Psalm 29, the term *kabod* [כבוד] is used in two ways: first, to denote honor and eminence, and second, to signify a visible manifestation. The first meaning is that someone gives honour and glory to God with two attitudes of glorifying and praising. The second meaning refers to the experience of the divine manifestation and glory through a visible medium. In Psalm 29, God utilises creation as a platform to display God's majestic and sovereign authority. This is structured through two distinct movements: (1) it appears in verses 1–2; and (2) it is detailed in verse 3 and verse 9. The theophanic narrative presents a glorious God who is known through the powerful activity of His voice. Simultaneously, the divine beings within the heavenly court continuously proclaim 'glory' in the celestial temple (Mays 1985:61).

Once the storm God has fully displayed His might through the thunder and the elements, the heavenly onlookers respond with a unified cry: 'And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"' (Psalm 29:9; cf. Habel & Avent 2001:45). This theophany makes YHWH's self-manifestation visible to all celestial watchers. A distinction is made between the divine beings called to praise God in the prologue and those worshippers who respond in verse 9b. In this context, 'temple' refers metaphorically to the heavens – YHWH's celestial residence rather than the physical temple in Jerusalem. This interpretation aligns with the view of the temple in Psalm 11:4 and Isaiah 66:1 (Habel & Avent 2001:45), where the sky is seen as a sacred tent stretched out by YHWH (cf. Ps 104:2) (Habel 1972:417–430). In modern terms, this is described as the heavenly audience exclaiming, 'great show, YHWH' (Habel & Avent 2001:45).

The call to praise in verses 3–4 has a cosmic scope that reflects the tone of the opening verses. The 'great waters' [רבים מים] (*mayim rabbim*) in verse 3 do not refer to the Mediterranean Sea, as some scholars suggest but are instead cosmological in nature. This term represents the waters of the vast, primordial abyss mentioned in the theophany of Psalm 18:17 (Barbiero 2016:385). The verb רעים '[God of glory] has thundered' signifies the Creator God's triumph over the forces of watery chaos – similar to Yam in Ugaritic tradition or Tiamat in Mesopotamia – at the dawn of time. Every subsequent clap of thunder serves to commemorate and re-actualise this ancient victory. This theme reaches its peak in verse 10, where YHWH is acclaimed as being 'enthroned over the flood' (Barbiero 2016:385). The specific term for flood, מַבּוּל [*mabbul*], appears only in Psalm 29:10 and the Genesis flood narrative. While there is no definitive proof that the psalm refers to a specific ancient myth (Habel & Avent 2001:45), Kloos (1981:641) suggests the flood symbolises a defeated enemy of YHWH, potentially the figure of Yam (the Sea) from Canaanite mythology. Thus, YHWH is hailed as King because of God's triumph over the chaotic waters, a concept that parallels the recognition of storm gods like Baal and Marduk as kings following their own victories over chaos (Habel & Avent 2001:45).

The force of the storm

Divine appearance in the Bible, known as theophany, occurs in diverse ways, with the storm theophany being a particularly prominent form. In most biblical accounts, there is a strict separation between the Creator and the natural elements; wind, clouds and lightning remain distinct parts of the created world rather than being God Himself (Polythress 2018:38). However, Psalm 29 is distinctive because it presents a nearly seamless identification between YHWH and the storm. In this text, God does not simply send a storm; rather, the psalm depicts a 'spectacular storm god' in action, manifesting His creative power through the intensity of the thunderstorm (Habel & Avent 2001:46).

Central to this portrayal is the יהוה קול [*qol* YHWH], the 'voice of YHWH', a dominant feature that equates the sound of thunder with the divine voice itself (Kraus 1988:348). Klingbeli (1999:88) confirmed this idea by presenting an indication of the repeated use of the expression יהוה קול in this text. A concentration on the nominal sentence counts 10 verbal forms and 40 noun forms. In addition, it was recorded that the character of the noun often repeats itself. The nouns in Psalm 29:3–9 depict an abundance of naturalistic descriptions. This text portrays the effect of YHWH's voice on various geographic locations and objects, as well as on the plant and animal life (Klingbeli 1999:93). In this hymn, the phrase יהוה קול is defined as a sound that articulates and communicates the awesome majesty and power of the Lord. In this case, most scholars agree that the voice of God in this text is not identified with thunder or a loud noise, but instead the voice of God is a manifestation of the storm itself (Habel & Avent 2001:46; Mays 1985:61–62). The יהוה קול [*qol* YHWH], breaks and shatters, twists and batters; the יהוה קול [*qol* YHWH] is parallel with YHWH or with 'the God of Glory' (Ps 29.3), the theophanic manifestation of the deity (Habel & Avent 2001:46)

This text describes the voice of God as the force of a destructive storm. It is observed that certain dynamic movements occur in the psalmist's description of the theophanic storms. This movement is reflected not only in geographic terms but also in the choice of motion-oriented language (Watson 1984:420). This is shown in the geographic dimension, which describes the movement of thunderstorms from the Mediterranean towards the coast and further inland (Klingbeli 1999:95).

This article examines two central themes: the progression of the storm god and the subsequent impact of this divine 'performance' on the Earth. The prologue of Psalm 29 vividly illustrates the magnificent and overwhelming force of this storm (Ps 29:4). As the storm advances from the sea to the land, it exerts its full power by annihilating the cedars of Lebanon (Ps 29:5). Consequently, the arrival of the storm is viewed as a ruinous force that targets the most robust and productive trees in the forest. Rather than providing life-sustaining rain, the storm engages in intense destruction, flattening everything in its path. This destructive nature is emphasised by the intensive Hebrew verb שבר (to break) storms, indicating that the storm's power does not support the forest ecosystem but instead actively dismantles it. The upheaval is so profound that the mountains of Lebanon and Sirion appear to leap like a young wild ox (Ps 29:6) (Habel & Avent 2001:46). As the event continues, it may even trigger forest fires, leading to the complete devastation of these habitats. Eventually, the storm shifts from the forests to the desert or wilderness. In this context, the text uses the verb 'to writhe' [יַחִיל] three times to describe how the desert and its inhabitants suffer under the wind's onslaught (Ps 29:8–9a). Similar to a locust swarm stripping an olive tree (Jl 1:7), the storm leaves the vegetation bare [יחשׂף]. Ultimately, the storm provides no moisture to the parched desert; it leaves only a trail of wreckage similar to the aftermath of a tornado (Habel & Avent 2001:46–47). This inherent destructiveness is further confirmed through a linguistic analysis of the verbs used throughout the biblical text. As shown in Table 1, the semantic range of the Hebrew verbs underscores the dynamic nature of the theophany.

The verbal structure of Psalm 29:3–9 is composed entirely of verbs of motion that carry negative, destructive connotations. This section of the text depicts YHWH's awe-inspiring appearance during a theophanic storm event. The passage's temporal distribution includes one perfect, three imperfects with three perfects and three participles. These forms appear to be used somewhat interchangeably to represent a habitual aspect of time, which justifies the use of the present tense in translations (Klingbeli 1999 89–90).

Scholars have various interpretations of the impact of the 'voice of YHWH', which is identified as the storm in action. Firstly, the 'voice of YHWH' introduced several insights regarding its geographic effects (Barbiero 2016:385, 387):

- Impact on living beings and vegetation: Verses 5–6a and verse 9 are viewed as corresponding sections. While verses 5–6a describe the 'voice of YHWH' affecting vegetation, verse 9 focuses on its impact on living beings, including animals and humans.
- Geographic distribution in Israel: Verses 6b–7 correspond with verse 8, highlighting the physical geography of Israel as the subject experiencing the divine voice. This effect is twofold, spanning the northern mountainous regions of Lebanon and Sirion (Mount Hermon) and the southern, flat desert areas of Kadesh-Barnea (Barbiero 2016:385).
- Symbolism of power: These geographic markers represent the boundaries of ancient Israel, where the 'voice of YHWH' acts as a destructive wild force that demonstrates God's sovereign authority over the entire ecosystem.

Secondly, the 'voice of YHWH' has the destructive aspect of a storm as it is typical of a hurricane that touches the 'cedars of Lebanon' as the highest mountain. This interpretation has a double meaning, namely: (1) the power of the storm destroys the symbol of human pride; and (2) the power of the storm broke the chain of Baal worship practices. The reason for this is that the tree was closely associated with the sanctuaries of Baal. There is a touch of humour that the voice of YHWH makes these mighty mountains jump. Metaphorically, these mountains serve as ancient symbols of eternity. Yet, God shatters this primordial symbolism, transforming these icons of permanence into the likeness of skipping buffalo calves. This is recorded in Isaiah 2:12–14 (Barbiero 2016:387):

> For YHWH of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against everything that exalts itself, to beat it down, against all the cedars of Lebanon high and lifted up, against all the oaks of Basan, against all the high mountains, against all the raised-up hills. (cf. Ezk 31:3; Am 2:9; Zch 11:1–2)

Based on the various opinions above, the authors conclude that the destructive power of storms on the Earth community is very powerful and ironic. It is powerful because storms cause much destruction for entire natural ecosystems.

TABLE 1: Hebrew verbs and semantic analysis in Psalm 29.

Form	Reference	Root	Meaning	Semantic notes
הָרְעוֹם	Psalm 29:3	רעם	To thunder, roar	Describes a physical event typically paired with lightning. In poetic and theophanic texts, this natural sound is identified as the voice of God
שבר וישַׁבֵּר	Psalm 29:5 Psalm 29:5	שבר	To break [*Qal*], shatter [*Piel*]	Refers to destructive physical actions against objects or people. God is frequently the agent of this 'breaking', often to defend God's people or destroy foreign idols. In this Psalm, it specifically describes God breaking trees
וירקידם	Psalm 29:6	רקד	To skip, to make skip [*Hiphil*]	A verb of motion indicating irregular, non-linear movement. It is used for dancing people, bouncing chariots and as seen here – skipping hills
חֹצֵב	Psalm 29:7	חצב	To hew out, dig	A motion verb denoting the physical impact of one object on another, such as stone-cutting or mining. It is used figuratively in poetic and prophetic literature
יחיל יחיל יחולל	Psalm 29:8 Psalm 29:8 Psalm 29:9	חול	To (cause to) shake [*Hiphil*], to bring forth [*Piel*]	Refers to non-linear movement where parts of an object move while the rest stays stationary. It can denote labour pains or God's creative act of giving birth or bringing forth
ויחשׂף	Psalm 29:9	חשׂף	To lay bare, to strip off	A motion verb indicating the removal of a covering to reveal what was hidden. Often used for uncovering the body in humiliation, it is used here for trees being stripped bare
אמר	Psalm 29:9	אמר	To speak	A verb of communication referring to the physical act of speaking

Source: Klingbeli, M., 1999, *Yahweh fighting from Heaven*, University Press Fribourg Switzerland, Fribourg

The voices of the Earth and its community are marginalised and rendered secondary when contrasted with the overwhelming power of the divine theophany (Habel & Avent 2001:47).

A plea for peace

In this passage, two primary voices compete for dominance: the celestial choir's refrain and the יהוה קול [*qol* YHWH], which represents the storm god in motion. Ultimately, the overwhelming power of the יהוה קול [*qol* YHWH] effectively silences the voices of both the Earth and its inhabitants. The voices of the two were eliminated and unintegrated from the celestial chorus. The Earth and the Earth community are not able to make a voice, either in the form of expressions of praising God or expressions of anguish over the cruel treatment of the storm god. The voice of the Earth and the Earth community are minor voices that are considered unimportant compared with the thundering theophany of God (Habel & Avent 2001:47).

Offering an alternative perspective, Habel and Avent (2001:47) argue that there was actually another voice that came in the aftermath of the storm. The alternative voice is strongly introduced at the final verse of this text with the free translated version as follows:

> May YHWH give strength to his people;
>
> May YHWH bless his people with peace (v.11)

In the epilogue of Psalm 29, the psalmist introduces an alternative perspective with several key goals. Firstly, this voice challenges the overwhelming 'voice of YHWH' by creating a space where the Earth and its inhabitants are no longer treated as mere objects of a storm's power; instead, they are recognised as active subjects capable of expressing their own emotions, whether through praise or lament. Secondly, the psalmist's final cry is not meant to celebrate the destruction but serves as a reminder to YHWH to care for God's people. According to Habel and Avent (2001), a display of violent meteorological force is merely self-serving 'theocentrism' if it does not result in a blessing for the community (Habel & Avent 2001:47).

Habel and Avent (2001:47) highlight a significant shift in the meaning of the word עז 'power' between the psalm's beginning and its end. In the epilogue, this 'power' is re-imagined: it is a plea for divine blessing and peace [*shalom*] rather than a display of intimidation. The psalmist essentially calls for a transformation of the divine character from a destructive storm god to a source of peace for the people. While the text is often translated as a factual statement, interpreting it as a petition suggests an attempt to foster a harmonious bond between the Creator, the creation and the Earth itself.

Thirdly, in this section, the psalmist introduces an 'alternative voice' designed to challenge the dominant 'voice of YHWH'. This shift serves several primary purposes:

- Empowering the Earth: It provides a platform for the Earth and its inhabitants to express their own existence and emotions – whether through praise or lament – rather than being treated as mere passive objects of a divine storm.
- A call for reciprocity: The psalmist's closing cry acts as a reminder that divine power should not exist solely for its own sake. Habel and Avent (2001:47) argue that displaying devastating meteorological force is merely 'egotistical theocentrism' if it is not followed by a blessing for the community.
- Redefining power: There is a significant contrast between the עז 'power' mentioned in the prologue and its use in the epilogue. Although the text initials by focusing on overwhelming force, its conclusion reinterprets such power not as a tool of intimidation, but as a plea for peace [*shalom*] and divine favor.
- Transforming the divine role: The psalmist petitions God to transition from a destructive storm deity to a source of peace, seeking to establish a balanced relationship between the Creator, the Earth and all living things.

This reinterpretation offers a path towards the Earth's restoration from victimisation. It reimagines the 'glory' [כָּבוֹד] of YHWH not as a terrifying display of thunder but as a life-restoring presence rooted in justice (Habel & Avent 2001:48). Ultimately, the Earth is elevated from a silent victim to an active subject capable of voicing its own experiences.

When analysing the profound natural upheaval depicted in Psalm 29, it is crucial to clarify the nature of the Earth's 'victimisation' within the text. From a historical and literary standpoint, the original purpose of the psalm was certainly not to glorify the destruction or victimisation of the natural world. The ancient writers did not harbour malice towards creation; rather, they employed the imagery of extreme natural upheaval – shattering cedars and shaking the wilderness – as a dramatic literary and theological tool to emphasise YHWH's unmatched sovereignty over the forces of chaos.

However, applying a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' as the first step in the Earth Bible interpretive framework – requires readers to look beneath the surface of the text's primary theological intent. This hermeneutic suspects that biblical texts, shaped by anthropocentric and theocentric ancient worldviews, often inadvertently marginalise the Earth community. Therefore, while the psalmist did not intend to celebrate the abuse of nature, the rhetoric used to exalt divine power inadvertently renders the Earth as a silent victim in the narrative. The natural world absorbs the overwhelming impact of the theophany, sustaining collateral damage as a direct consequence of this cosmic display.

By nuancing the term 'victimisation' in this way, the ecological reader does not accuse the original author of ecological hostility. Instead, this approach acknowledges the collateral impact of ancient theological metaphors.

Recognising the Earth as the silent, suffering subject caught in the crossfire of this divine manifestation is essential for the next hermeneutical step: retrieving the 'voice of the Earth'. Acknowledging this unintentional marginalisation allows the reader to fully appreciate the profound shift at the end of the psalm, where the collateral disruption of the Earth gives way to the ultimate, restorative blessing of shalom.

Theological significance

While reading Psalm 29 through its literary and canonical context highlights its theocentric purpose, this framework does not negate an ecological reading; rather, it provides a robust theological foundation for it. To understand the relationship between the Creator and the Earth community in this text, one must take into account both the theocentric intent of the author and the geocentric reality of the imagery in productive tension:

- Order out of chaos from a theocentric perspective: God's overwhelming display of power over nature – manifested in the violent storm – functions as a theological metaphor for suppressing chaos. For the post-exilic community, the terrifying forces of nature were closely associated with cosmic and political instability. Thus, when the 'voice of YHWH' [*qol* YHWH] thunders over the waters, breaks the cedars and shakes the wilderness (vv. 3–8), it is not a depiction of divine hostility towards creation. Instead, it is a polemical declaration of YHWH's absolute sovereignty over the forces of chaos. The storm theophany assures the community that their God possesses the power to subdue the chaotic entities that threaten their existence, bringing divine order to a fractured world.
- The ecological pivot – creation absorbing the shock: However, applying an ecological hermeneutic requires us to look beyond the theological metaphor to the ecological reality depicted within the text. While the theological intent was to comfort believers by demonstrating God's power over cosmic and political chaos, the narrative reality is that the Earth community absorbs the shock of this divine display. The towering cedars of Lebanon, the mountains of Sirion, and the wilderness of Kadesh all suffer collateral damage during this cosmic reordering. Acknowledging this dynamic is crucial for retrieving the 'voice of the Earth'. Identifying the natural world as the silent receiver of this violent theophany does not mean the original author intended to glorify the victimisation of nature. Rather, it reveals how ancient anthropocentric and theocentric metaphors inadvertently render the Earth as a vulnerable subject caught in the crossfire of divine order subduing chaos.
- Restoration as the ultimate goal: Ultimately, reading the psalm's suppression of chaos alongside its ecological implications illuminates the true trajectory of the text: moving from violent disruption to profound restoration. God asserts control over the storm and subdues the elements of chaos for a specific, restorative purpose, which is revealed in the psalm's concluding verse. YHWH sits enthroned over the flood – the ultimate symbol of contained chaos– not to perpetuate violence, but to empower His people and bless them with peace [*shalom*] (Ps 29:11). Because humans and nature are intrinsically connected within the created order, this divine shalom (peace, wholeness and harmony) cannot be isolated to humanity alone; it must extend to the very Earth community that endured the storm. Therefore, the theocentric subduing of chaos directly supports the geocentric conclusion: the text transitions from the collateral disruption of nature to an ultimate plea for universal peace and ecological restoration.

Conclusion

This study was initiated with the key question 'what and how' the voice of the Earth is heard in the biblical tradition, specifically in Psalm 29. This study proves that 'voice of the Earth' appears very expressive in the biblical tradition although voice tends to be silent. One significant finding in this study is that both texts promote the dynamics of voice movement from crisis to complaint, change to lamentation and ending with restoration. The movement reflects the existence of the Earth, which is struggling between crisis and restoration. The poetic traditions of the Psalms demonstrate, through both structure and content, the rich and multifaceted character of the Earth's voice. This text affirms that the existence of the Earth is determined by a harmonious mutual relationship between humans and God.

In conclusion, rereading Psalm 29 from an Earth perspective does not require abandoning its original theological purpose; rather, it deepens our understanding of the text's ultimate vision. When read within its literary context as the central pillar of Psalms 25–34, Psalm 29 clearly functions as a theocentric assurance to a vulnerable, post-exilic community. It depicts a sovereign God who commands the violent storm to suppress the forces of chaos and bring order to a turbulent world.

However, extending this reading ecologically through the hermeneutics of suspicion and identification illuminates the profound collateral impact of this divine reordering. The towering cedars of Lebanon and the wilderness of Kadesh are not victimised out of divine malice, but they nevertheless absorb the shock of this cosmic display, exposing the vulnerability of the Earth within ancient anthropocentric metaphors. Yet, it is exactly this tension that makes the retrieval of the 'voice of the Earth' so vital. The subduing of chaos is not an end in itself. As the hymn's counter-voice in verse 11 reveals, God asserts control over the storm so that He may bless His people with shalom. Because humanity and the cosmos are inextricably linked, this divine peace cannot be restricted to the human sphere. The text, therefore, journeys from the violent disruption necessary to quell chaos to an ultimate, restorative vision where God's shalom brings wholeness and peace to the entire Earth community.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Juliana A. Tuasela: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Agustinus M.L. Batlajery: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Validation. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

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