

Reading The Book of Jonah through the Eco-Spiritual Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Whether one chooses to acknowledge or disregard its significance, nature has always been part of us. In an anthropogenic era, the dire state of the environment has made it an increasingly concerning topic of discussion among us. Nature has been extensively examined in numerous scholarly discussions ranging from secular to religious perspectives. This paper examines how nature plays a crucial role in helping us understand the relationship between God and humans, as portrayed in the Bible. The Bible being a religious text exists with very specific purposes. That being said, elements of nature were also used very specifically in the Bible. Most presently available scholarly research focuses on reading the significance of nature elements from religious perspectives. However, this research employs the eco-spirituality theory to examine the book of Jonah from the Bible to determine the relationship between Jonah, God, and nature. Through this secular perspective, the aim is to show that elements of nature have been carefully woven into narratives to signify various meanings. Furthermore, this research aims to identify how God communicates with humans through nature, which eventually helps to establish various forms of relationships between humans and nature. Through these newly formed relationships, we can understand the authority of a Creator and the consequences of obedience and submission. All these highlight the importance of co-existence between humans and nature, and examining the Bible through the lens of eco-spirituality perpetuates the relevance of the Bible to 21st-century readers.

Keywords: Christianity, communication, ecospirituality, nature, the book of Johan

INTRODUCTION

One of the most influential religions to date is Christianity, its corresponding religious text being the Bible. For the translation of the purpose of this study, the New International Version (NIV) has been chosen for analysis due to its popularity internationally being the current No. 1 bestselling version due to its eligibility and international understanding (Livengood, 2004). This is an ideal version to analyze because of the vast number of people that read and quote it and because it is so widely read, this research would be relatable to the majority of people since the same text with the same lexicon and grammatical structures will be used. Some biblical scholars would see the events of Jonah as satirical (Wolfe, 2011), while some claim it to be historical or possibly a parable (Alexander & Alexander, 2017). Despite the unrealistic representation of the tale of Jonah, it is undeniable that the prophet Jonah is historical, and examining the presence of natural elements will greatly contribute to new insights in understanding the text. Besides, the book of Jonah is truly about can be interpreted in multiple different ways. Some believe it is about obedience, while others may see it as defiance (Ryu, 2016). Regardless, conventional interpretations of the Book of Jonah reflect the



Christian faith and the values that Christians practice. In other words, conventional interpretations of the Book of Jonah are generally theological. Theological interpretations of the Book of Jonah are usually analyses centering on the mutual communication between God and Jonah. These researches point to the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. Some of these include concepts of repentance (Cook, 2019), as well as exile (Cook, 2019; Kelsey, 2020). There are even studies that analyze psychological tendencies to judge other people based on the behavior exhibited by Jonah in the Bible (Lasine, 2016). This reinforces the fact that the book of Jonah can be interpreted in many different ways, even though conventional depictions of the book are generally theological concerning the nature of a religious text based on the Christian faith.

Meanwhile, Ecocriticism emerged as a theory in 1978 proposed by William Rueckert by incorporating ecological principles into literary studies. To effectively understand Ecocriticism, it must first be understood that the present ecological crisis as we know it is a byproduct of human influences (Mishra, 2016). Mishra (2016) also stated that the main distinction between ecocriticism and conventional nature writing is the ethical stance taken into analysis or writing. Initially, Ecocriticism was aimed at environmental justice by highlighting eco-consciousness; and how human ethics affect nature. Later stages of this theory expanded the understanding of 'nature' not only to the immediate environment but also to who we are from within – the universal truth of humanity. Since then, Ecocriticism has developed multiple sub-theories that focus on different perspectives to analyse literature with relations to the environment such as Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, Ecofaith, Ecospirituality, and more. The application of Ecocriticism in literature is very prominent, it has been used to analyze poetry, dramas, lyrics, and even religious texts. Research by Leese (2019) shows that in the age of the Anthropocene, scholars have been challenged to look at how historical readings of the Bible have altered based on anthropogenic worldviews. This claim proves that reading the Bible in the 21st century has been influenced by experiences of the 21st century and ultimately leads back to the question 'Is the Bible relevant today?'. As times change, so do our interpretations and perceptions. Humans are living in an age where not only an ecological crisis is prominent but it is also in a dire state. The Bible has many representations of nature, from Creation in The Eden Story to being in exile in the wilderness, Nature is a very prominent element in the Bible. The differing factor that separates nature from biblical texts from other literature is the relation or communication with God, which is the key to interpretation. Therefore, in an anthropogenic age, biblical interpretations of nature could be the key factor in influencing one's attitude towards the environment. So, this study will incorporate Ecospirituality – an ecocritical theory that recognizes the fate of humans and nature that is intertwined with that of a Creator.

The events of the book of Jonah illustrate Jonah's interaction with God through the forces of nature. With the prominence of nature elements in the book of Jonah, modern-day ecocritics would inevitably want to study the relevance of the book from an ecocritical point of view. Hence, this research aims to analyze how nature plays a role in connecting the Bible character Jonah to God through the forces of nature and to understand how interaction with God affects nature. Various research done on nature has proven that nature is interpreted differently in different cultures, and personal experiences may alter interpretations as well. While some people see nature as representations of blessings and hope, others may see it as karma or warnings of upcoming troubles. Due to the many different interpretations that have been presented by various scholars over the years, there is no clear interpretation of what nature truly is and what it embodies. Symbolically, from a literary perspective, storms and waves could be a representation of troubles or feelings of being overwhelmed. However, a different perspective arises when modern depictions of nature come into play. In the modern era, the relationship between humans, God, and nature is crucial in determining the attitudes and consequences humans have towards nature. One of which could be of potential influence to this is the reading

of the Bible. Although most of the researchers focused on the theological perspective of the Bible that applies to the principles practiced by Christians, the Bible is a widely distributed book that is accessible to the general public. In recent years, topics of the environment and interactions with it have also become more prominent, especially in secular literary works. This poses a concept of how the environment and nature are highly relevant to the existence of mankind. In response to that, the community that does not practice Christianity could also benefit from it with a literary worldview.

LITERATURE REVIEW

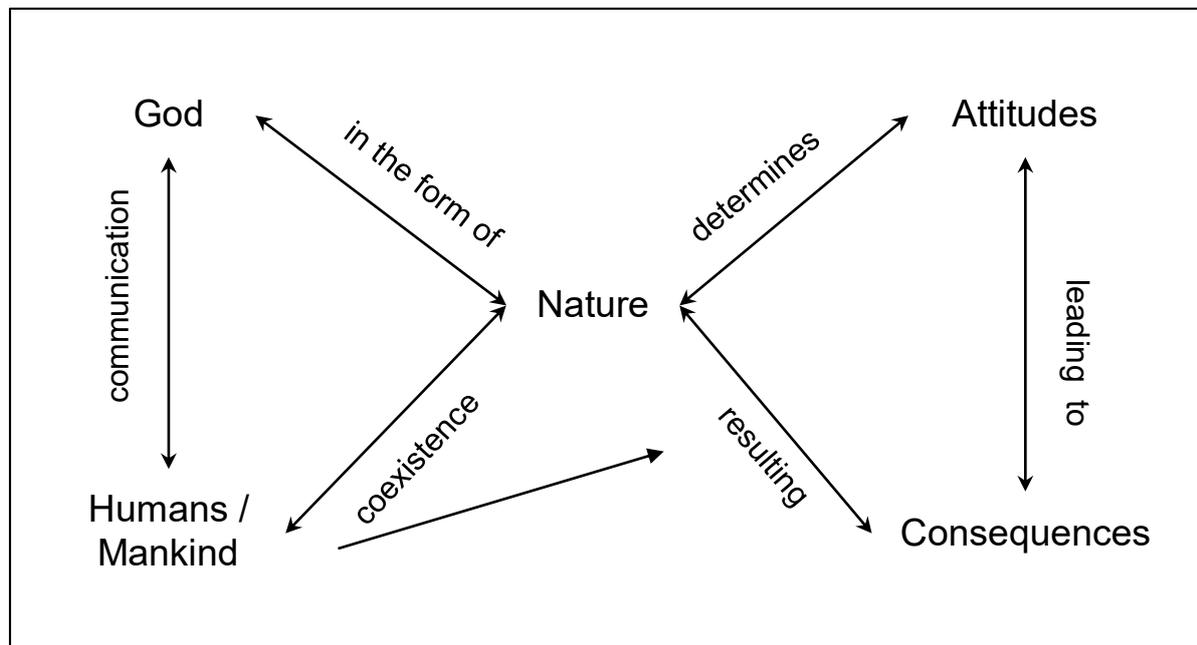
The Bible, particularly the Book of Jonah, has been studied quite extensively by scholars from various fields through various viewpoints and perspectives. When studies of the Bible are being conducted, one key element that cannot be disregarded or altered is the concept of the existence of God or the presence of a deity. Duvall et al. (2012) even claim that it is dangerous to read the Bible out of context. In research comparing perceptions of nature of various authors with biblical representations, some perceptions of nature were seen to be the essence of a deity, where nature is worshipped and glorified. However, the common emerging theme remains in the idea that in the biblical perspective, God is the Creator and natural elements are creations of God (Wakeling, 2018). As far as nature is concerned, Gaston et al. (2018) define ecology as “the study of the abundance and distribution of organisms and the interactions that determine these”. Needless to say, these studies have contributed abundantly to our understanding of nature. Another research by Cacanaska et al. (2019) states that religion plays a key role in determining the attitudes that men have towards nature. This is based on the concept of religion being a key link to morality. The said concept also contributes to Mujib’s claim on religious responses to disaster-hit communities whereby all of God’s creation, including nature and the environment, should be preserved under the pretense of God being Creator and being compassionate (Mujib, 2015). In one research conducted by Jax et al. (2018), human relationships with nature are attributed to the concept of stewardship being the practice of ‘care’ for nature. This stewardship is commonly linked to religious practices. What this shows is that with religion in place (in this case, Christianity), a certain value is instilled where mankind has the responsibility to protect nature. A prominent factor contributing to human-nature relationships as claimed by Magill and Potter (2017) is an interconnectedness that serves as the maintenance of the balance of the ecosystem and all it consists of (living beings and supernatural beings alike). What is interesting about this is that it highlights the cultures of many that the relationship men have with nature is a means of worshipping God. This is reflected earlier in Wakeling’s (2018) conclusion that nature is closely related to a supernatural deity being a Creator. Thus, the concept of eco-spirituality remains strong despite many who attempted to analyze human-nature relationships without a deity in the picture. Although it may be argued that it is an innate characteristic of human beings to either be advocative or destructive towards nature, it is undeniable that humans have left more than just footprints in the presence of nature. Although the human-nature relationship has been studied from a very wide perspective, not much has been said about the effects of nature on itself. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to ask whether nature has affected its destruction.

A review of the literature has shown that nature has been studied with religious and non-religious views. From a theological perspective, it can be seen that it is significant to the Christian faith, From a non-theological standpoint, it is essential to understand nature given the current ecological crisis to raise awareness and stimulate activism or advocacy for nature. To illustrate this more merely, nature is both influential to humans and carries human influence. This research will serve as a bridge to identify communicative factors concerning religion and how that will affect attitudes towards nature and the consequence that follows.

METHOD

Textual analysis will be conducted to examine the relationships between God, nature, and humans to establish points of convergence between the three. The textual analysis will focus

specifically on the relationship between man and God being connected through nature and how that relationship with nature determines the attitudes and consequences of humans towards nature. God communicates with humans in the form of nature, fundamentally being acknowledged as the Creator of both. In this sense, humans and nature coexist as equal beings (God's creation). This relationship thus determines the attitudes humans will have towards nature, and the attributed attitude will lead to a consequence either on self or on nature. The discourse present in the book of Jonah is not only between Jonah and God but also between Jonah and the sailors, which sheds light on the relationship between humans and nature as a whole and how it relates to the presence in the Bible.



In presenting the analysis from the eco-spiritual perspective, it is crucial to note that eco-spirituality places emphasis on the need to connect the self to nature. So, this research will aim to seek to demonstrate the connection between eco-spirituality, communication with God, and the effects that follow. The interrelationship between one another will be reflected through a review of the book of Jonah from the Bible. To understand this relationship, it must first be established that God, nature, and mankind are in co-existence. The following framework demonstrates how the three core elements, namely God, nature, and humans, will be analyzed. It also indicates how nature plays a pivotal role in connecting God with the human.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

More than meets the eye

The elements that are presented in the book of Jonah each hold a significant meaning. According to the sequence of appearance, the elements presented are the storm at sea, the animals (a huge fish and livestock), and a leafy plant. As we explore the significance of these nature elements and what they mean to the character Jonah, it should be noted that these possible perceptions could be a factor of influence on the general public towards nature. The storm presented in the book of Jonah was presented in the very first chapter. As the story goes, Jonah was instructed by God to go to the city of Nineveh to preach against their sinful actions. Instead of obeying, Jonah rebelled and fled on a ship where the winds blew strong and the seas were rough.

Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

(New International Version Bible, 2011, Jon 1:4)

Based on the verse, it can be observed that the storm is a response to Jonah's rebellious actions. In other words, the storm could be seen as a form of punishment in this context. In a modern-day context, this perspective could be observed in Mujib's (2015) perspective of disaster being a consequence of human actions. However, a different perspective could be brought to light whereby disasters or certain natural phenomena may be seen as a signal or redirection.

Tarshish, widely believed to be along the province of Spain, was located 2,500 miles west of Joppa, the opposite direction of Nineveh is, 550 miles east of Joppa (Stewart, 1945). As Jonah travels in the opposite direction to Tarshish, the storm occurs and brings fear to all those who are caught in it. As the ship rowed further away from the appointed location of Nineveh, the storm grew stronger. This could be an indication of redirection rather than punishment. With this perspective, we may be able to see nature not only as a result of human actions but also as indications of wrong or with purpose. Therefore, nature may not only be a consequence of certain human actions but also be a form of redirection and an indication of wrong.

According to Scripture, the sailors throw Jonah into the ocean to appease the Lord. Jonah was then swallowed by a huge fish and was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights where Jonah prayed.

From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God.

(New International Version Bible, 2011, Jon 2:1)

Jonah is seen to have experienced a time of isolation and some form of reconciliation with God. Although there is no direct indication of interaction with the fish other than that the character Jonah is swallowed whole, Jonah's cries in the fish serve to indicate Jonah's relationship with God. The fish indicates a time of isolation when Jonah was brought to the depths of the ocean. In isolation, Jonah reconnected with God. In this context, we could observe nature as a place of sanctuary where one could form connections with the spiritual self or even a deity. This eco-spiritual claim reforms the idea of interaction with nature. It shows that nature is a beneficial element and not one that is dangerous or harmful in some way. One could interpret Jonah's interaction with the fish to be dangerous, where the fish swallowed him whole, but the isolation that came with it allowed Jonah to connect with God on a spiritual level and achieve redemption.

But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.' And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. (New International Version Bible, 2011, Jon 2:9-10)

As Jonah's connection with God was established through nature, Jonah achieved redemption and, as a result, the fish vomited Jonah onto dry land. This interaction entails that nature not only allows oneself to establish spiritual connections with a deity or oneself, but it also produces results of what is commonly perceived as self-awareness in the form of redemption or forgiveness or even a newfound sense of purpose.

One of the most significant elements of nature found in the book of Jonah is the leafy plant presented in chapter four, where Jonah's anger was met with God's response in the form of a leafy plant that grew and died overnight. Jonah responded angrily to the cycle and even wished to die.

But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I

not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

(New international Version Bible, 2011, Jon 4:10-11)

The above excerpt shows a direct comparison of the leafy plant and the people of Nineveh. In this context, God emphasized that both are His creations and that if humans could care for the plant even when they are not responsible for it, God could also care for people, even if they have sinned. This direct resemblance of the leafy plant to the city of Nineveh portrayed the direct connection between humans and nature, that humans and nature are coexisting features. Verse 10 directly addresses the concern that humans have for nature. What these findings show is that the interpretation of nature in the biblical era was intentional. The use of natural elements was included to convey specific meanings or for specific means of communication. In line with the intentionality of the presence of elements of nature, it can be concluded that nature is presented as symbolic figures that fill the void that people of the biblical era needed at the time.

This section of the research establishes the first part of the claimed relationship between humans, God, and nature showing the relationship between the three entities. God communicates with humans in the form of nature, while humans coexist with nature. This establishment of a relationship will be discussed in the following sections and will allow for a deeper understanding of the essence of the relationship between humans and nature.

Connecting to the infinite spirit

God's communication with Jonah presents itself in two forms, a direct discourse and responses through nature. What can be observed through the book of Jonah is that whenever a natural element is present or used, it is usually a form of communication exhibited by God to convey certain intentions. Based on the nature elements discussed above, the communicative element will be examined. The excerpt below is taken from the book of Jonah, where Jonah was instructed to go to the city of Nineveh to preach against their sins.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

(New International Version Bible, 2011, Jon 1:1)

The verse above shows an instruction given to Jonah by God. From the discourse, God is seen as an authoritative figure, while Jonah's character can be interpreted as rebellious as shown below.

But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

(New International Version Bible, 2011, Jon 1:3)

The response exhibited by Jonah reflects the tendency of humans to defy authority. Jonah's rebellious nature reflects modern-day rebellion or defiance and the text adequately shows the consequence of disobedience. A recurring theme in the Bible shows how God reciprocates with the actions of humans in the form of nature. This leads to the belief that the interaction with nature is essentially a form of interaction with God.

To put things into perspective, the instruction-response phenomenon is essentially a form of communication. What could be derived from this interaction is that it is not impossible to

communicate and connect with a deity figure be it God or any other deities. Philosophical views see these spiritual connections (spirituality) as important factors for social development and that spirituality highly promotes connectedness to nature (Pirnazarov, 2020; Rezapouraghdam et al., 2017). Rezapouraghdam et al. (2017) supported these concepts in the findings that spirituality remains a factor influencing pro-environmental behaviors. To sum it up, while communication with God can be seen as both direct and indirect, it is undeniable that natural elements serve as an important medium of connection and communication between humans and God through life, literature, and time. This communicative element of the study also serves to establish the relationship element which will be discussed in the next segment.

The eternal circle

Relationships between God, nature, and humans have been an area of study that has been debated for centuries. Hence, one cannot deny the existence of spiritual relationships. Walton (1996) described spiritual relationships as intrapersonal, connecting the individual to the self, others, a higher power, and nature. Walton (1996) also claimed that any dehumanizing attitudes or behaviors must be eradicated for spiritual relationships to form. Keeping that in mind, it can be said that the prominence of a spiritual relationship in one's life should affect how this individual interacts with nature in this sense. As mentioned in the section above, God is seen as an authoritative figure not just in the book of Jonah but throughout the Bible. It can be seen through God's instructions to Jonah.

“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me”
(New International Version Bible, 2011, Jon 1:2).

The utterance was not spoken in the form of a request but rather in the form of an order, putting God higher on the hierarchy of the God, nature, and human relationship. With that, we can assume that the position that allows God to give orders proves that God is in an authoritative position and that he holds sovereignty over his creation. Putting God in a sovereign authoritative position also means that humans and nature do not stand on the same ground as God. Hence, the response towards such authority should ideally be to submit or to obey authority. However, through the book of Jonah, we can also observe a different kind of response.

“But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord”
(New International Version Bible, 2011, Jon 1:3)

The above excerpt illustrates the defiance response in which Jonah deliberately disobeyed God's orders and went in the opposite direction of where he intended to go. What can be drawn from the passage is that disobedience towards higher authorities will result in consequences that need to be borne. To support this case, retribution theology states that modern Christians must remain obedient to God at all times to avoid suffering (Meek, 2016). As seen in Jonah's case, Jonah's defiance was met with a consequence, being caught in a storm at sea. This interaction may be considered a form of punishment according to theological retribution beliefs.

In another instance, Jonah's submission towards God's authority, however, resulted in salvation for the Ninevites, where God had the authority to spare them from destruction.

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.
(New International Version Bible, 2011, Jon 3:10)

The establishment of the authoritative-submissive-disobedient relationship between God, nature, and humans in this segment shows that God communicates his intentions through natural elements and establishes a form of hierarchical relationship that would either bring disasters, retribution, or salvation depending on the response. This relationship is important to understanding how humans should interact with nature in a spiritual context. In a spiritual context, respect for nature should be accompanied by respect towards a higher authority or vice versa. Nature in a sense represents the state of a higher being and, as seen in the book of Jonah, is used as responses that reflect symbolically a respect towards this authoritative relationship. On the matter of co-existence, it is observed in multiple literature including and especially religious texts that the concept of creation lies in that of humans and nature originating from a higher power, a deity, or God. As seen in the book of Jonah on two separate occasions, humans and nature are perceived to be in a coexisting relationship where no one is superior to the other.

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

(New International Version Bible, 2011, Jon 3:7, 8)

The passage subtly illustrates that under God's perception of sin, humans and animals alike hold the same position where both are responsible for their sins. In other words, God views humans and animals as beings on the same level. This thought is again reinforced in the following passage.

"And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

(New International Version Bible, 2011, Jon 4:11)

The passage illustrates that God views humans and nature as equal beings that need to be advocated for. The concept of co-existence in nature may not be new, but it requires a significant amount of effort. Many understand co-existence to be a concept of humans ruling the earth and many misinterpret Creation to be humans being given authority to dominate over creatures and other beings of earth. Such misinterpretations shed light on anthropogenic beliefs. To add on, economic, technological, and cultural developments have shaped anthropogenic beliefs that lead to the belief that nature and humans are separate entities (Folke et al., 2021). Such beliefs cause segregation between humans and nature and reinforce concepts of dominion. However, for preservation and advocacy towards nature to happen, one must first understand that humans and nature exist in a coexisting relationship and the two cohabitate on earth.

To understand co-existence, an understanding of the surrounding environment and all that is in it must be established. Researchers have concluded that humans and nature are very closely interconnected and that each affects the other (Jamili & Khoshkam, 2017; Crespini & Simonetti, 2018; Folke et al., 2021). As such, the interconnectedness between humans and nature is vital not only for the well-being of humans but also for the environment. As established previously, this coexisting relationship could also be perceived as a spiritual relationship if one feels connected to the environment as a whole. In that sense, an eco-spiritual awakening may be present and will aid in influencing the individual to see oneself as a part of nature rather than a separate entity, establishing co-existence.

Jonah's responses and the form of discourse reflect the intimate relationship that he had with God based on an element of intimate discourse which consists of knowledge and details about certain items and self-disclosure (Clancy, 2015).

He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

(New International Version Bible, 2011, Jon 4:2)

Jonah's cries represented the relationship he had with God, in which he could freely speak and disclose his feelings without having to refrain. In addition to that, Jonah exhibited knowledge of God's character being '*gracious, compassionate, slow in anger, abundant in love, and willing to avoid sending calamity*'. Based on the tone of voice and honesty in the utterance, Jonah seemed to have a personal relationship with God. As such, it can be claimed that his relationship with God was spiritual, as spiritual connections indicate a connection to the external self, including a connection to a higher order.

This relationship between humans and a higher order must be provoked, as it influences one's attitudes and behavior from a philosophical standpoint. Having this intimacy with God may be able to promote positive spiritual wellness, as summarized by Godfrey (2016) as intrinsic, behavior-oriented, and encourages life-enhancing beliefs. With this, it can be interpreted that an intimate relationship with God alters the behavior and beliefs that humans have toward their surrounding environment. If one can establish an intimate relationship with God and allow spiritual transformation to take place, pro-environmental beliefs and attitudes can be instilled with the transformation of an individual's personal beliefs, convictions, and perception of nature as discussed based on the communicative and relational elements above. The three-way relationship between God, nature, and humans based on coexistence and intimacy is vital and correlated. One must have an intimate relationship with the elements beyond the self, only then can coexistence be possible thus influencing the interactions mankind will have with nature.

This segment establishes how nature is portrayed and its symbolic meanings in the Bible. The elements were then brought into discussion in terms of how the communicative elements found in the book of Jonah establish various types of relationships between God, humans, and nature and how that relationship can affect an individual's attitude toward nature. Thus, eco-spirituality can be achieved through understanding nature as a form of communication with God that establishes a relationship or an intrinsic spiritual awakening that changes the attitudes one has towards nature.

CONCLUSION

The elements of nature in the book of Jonah have been analyzed from a point of symbolic meanings and means of communication. Symbolically, it is safe to claim that nature can be a form of consequence of our actions or a redirection and indication of wrongdoings. Other than that, nature also allows oneself to be connected spiritually with the self or a higher power, which promotes the achievement of redemption and a sense of purpose. Lastly, elements of nature were also used symbolically to convey certain meanings and intentions, such as coexistence and advocacy. Through the book of Jonah, we can observe that these communicative elements, be they direct or indirect, serve as instruction-response and teaching-learning communication, whereby we see that communication between God or the universe and humans is made possible. Such communications then establish relationships such as authority and submission, disobedience, advocacy, co-existence, and intimacy between God, humans, and nature. Although analyzing the book of Jonah through the lens of eco-spirituality may seem very religious, the concept of spirituality does not necessarily have to be religious (Walton, 1996). Hence, this study once again highlights the importance of nature as a medium in connecting humans to God. Even to nonbelievers who wish to omit God out of the equation, as shown in the textual analysis, nature always brings the three closely together.

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