29 BiAS - Bible in Africa Studies

Sidney K. Berman, Paul L. Leshota, Ericka S. Dunbar,
Musa W. Dube, Malebogo Kgalemang (eds.)

MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA AND BIBLICAL STUDIES

Interpretations in the Context of Climate Change

University of Bamberg Press

29 Bible in Africa Studies

Études sur la Bible en Afrique
Bibel-in-Afrika-Studien

Bible in Africa Studies
Études sur la Bible en Afrique
Bibel-in-Afrika-Studien

Volume 29

edited by
Joachim Kügler,
Kudzai Biri, Ezra Chitando, Rosinah Gabaitse,
Masiiwa Ragies Gunda, Johanna Stiebert, Lovemore Togarasei

University
of Bamberg
Press
2021

Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Biblical Studies

Interpretations in the Context of Climate Change

edited by
Sidney K. Berman, Paul L. Leshota, Ericka S. Dunbar,
Musa W. Dube, Malebogo Kgalemang

University
of Bamberg
Press
2021

Bibliographische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Informationen sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de/ abrufbar.

Herstellung und Druck: docupoint Magdeburg
Umschlaggestaltung: University of Bamberg Press
Umschlagbild: © Joachim Kügler mit Sidney Berman & Musa W. Dube
Deko-Graphiken: © Joachim Kügler
Text-Formatierung: Irene Loch, Joachim Kügler, Tinos S. Matanga

ISSN: 2190-4944
ISBN: 978-3-86309-787-5 (Druckausgabe)
eISBN: 978-3-86309-788-2 (Online-Ausgabe)
URN: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-498397
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.20378/irb-49839

Dedicated to

Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro

A Founding Member
of the
Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

Acknowledgement

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth Circle) has benefited from various contributions of its members over the years, both in kind and cash. For this we are truly grateful to our Circle member, Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro has supported various fundraising opportunities, including contributions of her own time and money. At the time of the All Africa 5TH Circle Conference in Botswana (July 2019), Musimbi was wrapping up her responsibility as the President and CEO of the Global Fund for Women, and therefore, was unable to attend the conference in person. Keeping her commitment as one of the founders of the Circle, she decided to take a step of faith and contributed to the Circle 30th anniversary celebration through a significant amount of money, which included her end of service bonus and some funds raised through Global Fund for Women. For this, we are grateful to Musimbi Kanyoro and to the Global Fund for Women. We are also grateful to, the University of Botswana, Global Challenges Research Fund, World Council of Churches, The Church of Holland and the Ecumenical HIV and AIDs Alliance for their contributions towards the conference. Our gratitude also goes to the Botswana Circle Chapter for successfully organising and hosting a splendid conference. The friendships and contributions of Prof. Johanna Stiebert and Dr. Katie Edwards were truly divine; we heartily thank them both. We extend our gratitude to all the book contributors and peer reviewers who made this project a success by devoting their time and expertise. Special thanks also go to Black Theology journal for allowing us to republish the article by Musa W. Dube, vis., "'And God Saw that it was Good!' An Earth-Friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1."

Last, but not least, we would like to thank Joachim Kügler and the Editorial Board of Bible in Africa Studies (BiAS) at University of Bamberg Press for immortalising this project to be calcified in a publication.

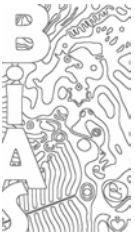


Table of Contents

Foreword: And Still We Rise – Together

Musimbi Kanyoro

Maya Angelou's poem "and Still We Rise!" inspires me. In 1989 when we launched the *Circle of Concerned African Theologians* (The Circle), our goal was to redress the dearth of theological reflections and writings by African women. Mercy Amba Oduyoye invited me to join her vision in 1988, and I answered "Yes," without hesitation and I am forever grateful to have been one of the handmaids who birthed the Circle. We named ourselves "the Circle" so that we could always widen the space to make room for one more. Writing and publishing were the two impact goals to measure our success. Three decades later, Circle members are to be found on every continent and our published works are used in many academic institutions and informal gatherings all over the world. We have by far surpassed the number of publications we imagined, and these are made up of books, articles, theses, dissertations, poems, newspaper clips, reports and more. Electronic publications and postings were never in our imagination then, but today, we are very present in social media.

Circle women are more than writers whose works are published. We have become "the Circle" of prophets, teachers, evangelists, advocates, philanthropists, and leaders in public and private sectors. We have occupied our place in previously male dominated theological and ecumenical institutions in Africa and beyond and we are ordained and lay leaders of our faith communities. Most important we have become friends with each other and together, we are disciples of justice for people and for the planet, earth.

So, if you ask me, am I satisfied that we have done enough to bring change? More than 50 years ago, Martin Luther King said: "there are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, 'when will you ever be satisfied?' And he said, "No, no, no. We are not satisfied. We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream." We too. The Circle will not be satisfied until we

have seen men and women work together and embrace gender equality and reject gender-based violence, discrimination and oppression of women. We will not be satisfied until we have seen all rights of women protected in every place; until we have realised the interconnection between saving lives and saving mother earth. And so, We Still Arise! This book is a testimonial of the ongoing journey of determination and resilience.

In October on 2018, I was in a meeting of Women World Leaders on Climate Justice in Bellagio, Italy. Each one of the 50 of us committed to do something about Climate Change. I committed to engage with Women Theologians and Women Scientists to promote women's leadership in Climate Change. It was therefore a most rewarding privilege for me to have the opportunity raise funding and also to dedicate my retirement gift from the Global Fund for Women to support the Circle Meeting in Botswana that enabled the peer review of papers that make this book. The first book of the Circle was "Talitha Cumi" Daughter Arise. This book is evidence that, we have stayed together, and Still We Arise!

The proverbial saying "we stand on the shoulders of those before us" is true to the Circle. Reading the contributions in this book clearly brings to focus the legacy of late World Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Professor Wangari Mathai and her lifelong advocacy for human rights and environmental protection. The theme "Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Religious Imagination takes me to the rural village where I was born and raised. I have written and theologised about this place and even done a TED talk about it. Today when I go "home", I find that the rivers which used to flow freely have dried and women and girls now walk longer distances to get water and they have cellphones.

The new paradigm is about imagining "women, water and technology". These three are very relevant to this very moment in the world where Covid 19 has redefined the entire world in a way that nobody imagined. Water has always been important, but it has been elevated to the highest-level with a pandemic whose best and only precautionary protection is to isolate and wash hands frequently with water and

soap. What does this mean for African women? African Women spend an average of 200 million hours per day collecting water. That comes to 40 billion hours a year. Imagine what could be accomplished in that amount of time. Imagine how many subjects' girls could learn: literature, science and languages. Imagine how much time women could engage in leadership in community and public life. Yet, it seems that these dreams are always pushed out of our imagination.

In my village, the rivers dried, and the mobile phone came. Business analysts actually say that water is more expensive as a commodity today than oil and gold. Financial markets have launched a water index and indeed are following water not only because it is a precious commodity, but also because it is a very limited commodity. Phones, Tablets and laptops have unleashed their own disruptions as they propagate beyond the city centres into rural village because of flash discs which access the Internet beyond city firewalls. The use of technology to connect is as urgent as never before exasperated by the Corona Pandemic lock down. So, taken together, water and technology for me are shapers of the future that the Circle must imagine hence forth. These commodities are going to define who drops out and who is inside. They are going to define where change is accelerated and where it is retarded.

The pandemic has been terrible for humans and good for the environment. Scientists tell us that the air is cleaner, the birds and animals are happier in their premises and the haze over the horizon is lifted and people are seeing the beauty they never saw before the pandemic. Yet the concern of the world is not to appreciate these changes and embrace them but rather the focus is being put on how we go back to all of the things we used to do which had not respect for environmental care and protection and often denied climate change. Leadership to reject the old ways needs to come from women and the Circle women are a resource to link faith and action to the choices we must now make by imagining and going into a new future. We need Science and facts to accompany our pragmatism and common sense

based on our experience. This is why I am engaged with women Scientist through Homeward Bound whose slogan inspires me; "mother earth needs her daughters".

The urgent plea from Homeward Bound is that we must lead for the greater good; we must manage the planet as our home. The visionary goal is: by 2027, to equip a 1000-strong global collaboration of women with a background in STEMM to lead, influence and contribute to decision making as it shapes the future of our planet. Like the Circle, Homeward Bound (HB) is a groundbreaking, global leadership initiative for women with a background in STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine). Its three strategic focal points are: 1) I am willing and able to lead, 2) We are stronger together, and 3) We are taking actions with impact. The foundation of this initiative is an annual year-long leadership development program, which is facilitated by a global faculty of experts and environmental champions, and aims to increase skills in leadership, strategy, visibility and collaboration, while also broadening the scope of participants' scientific knowledge. Each program culminates in a three-week expedition to Antarctica, one of the most ecologically sensitive and inspiring places on Earth that still stores ¾ of all the earth's water.

Each graduating cohort of participants becomes part of a global network of like-minded women committed to demonstrating a model of leadership (collaborative, inclusive, legacy-minded) that will influence outcomes for men and women towards a healthier planet, and a sustainable future for us all. At the end of 2019, before travel closed down, I was invited to faculty and spent several weeks in Antarctica with 100 women with a STEMM background, chosen from some 36 nationalities and as many sciences, to be part of Homeward Bound, a ground-breaking global leadership initiative for the greater good. In Antarctica the cost of climate change is very apparent, even though the whole is still largely untouched by human hand.

At the same time, it is not impossible to see how this wholeness is endangered by what is happening in the world at large. We learned about the retreat of the glaciers resulting from global warming, the movement south of Adélie Penguins for whom the northern end of the Antarctic Peninsula is increasingly not cold enough, and about

the risk of contamination resulting from the exploding tourist industry. For me, as an African leader, it was a realisation that if we do not preserve this place, if we do not value its wholeness for Mother Earth, then the lion in the Okavango in Namibia will suffer with the sea lion in Antarctica, the elephants in Amboseli in Kenya will suffer with the elephant seals that inhabit this frozen wilderness.

The problems of climate change and the saving of our mother earth are complex. They are interconnected; and any solution that we choose must embrace broader collaborations across people, sectors, disciplines and even faiths. We know that the impact of a warmer planet will be massive. The changing patterns of weather affect food production, different ways in which diseases like malaria and respiratory illness spread in communities. We hear that because of weather patterns, the illness that we thought we were overcoming or had eradicated are coming back. We know of increasing deaths because of weather events such as floods, droughts, invasion of locusts and plagues etc. and all of these are contributing to populations dislocating and insecurity.

Decades ago, behavioral scientists adopted the term "wicked problem." A wicked problem has many interconnected causes and seemingly conflicting solutions. This is where imagination and reimagination are called into place. For the Circle, 30 years is not enough. No, no, no. This volume celebrates God's grace of bringing as this far. *And Still We Arise!*

SECTION A

THE LANDSCAPE:
EARTH, BIBLE, GENDER AND THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

1. Editorial: Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Bible Studies

Sidney K. Berman, Paul L Leshota, Malebogo Kgalemang and Ericka S. Dunbar

Introduction

At the time of doing the finishing touches of this book, many scholars of environmental conservation are saying that nature has struck back at humanity in a bid for survival (and/or recovery). Paital (2020:4), for example, is of the opinion that nature deliberately introduced Covid-19 to enforce social lockdowns as a means of self-regeneration after being ravaged by human beings. The world is reeling from the impact of Covid-19. The World Health Organisation has declared the virus outbreak a Global Public Health Emergency, with official worldwide infections exceeding 30 million, and deaths 1 million (Worldometer 2020). The devastating effects on human beings include psychological depression, fear, economic losses, disruption of educational and other social systems, and overwhelmed healthcare structures (El Zowalaty 2020). Nonetheless, ecological reports and measurements generally indicate a positive effect on the ecosystem. In the words of Musimbi Kanyoro, "The pandemic has been terrible for humans and good for the environment" (see the foreword above). For example, due to travel restrictions and lockdowns, some countries report cleaner air, cleaner water, less waste, very low noise levels, gradual repair of the ozone hole (The Hindu 2020). Due to reduced human mobility, wild animals, marine animals and birds have moved more freely and closer to human settlements and have possibly increased in number (Wikelski 2020; The Hindu 2020). This, he considers as natural selection in the same way that nature got rid of the unmanageable dinosaurs (*ibid.*).

Like Paital, the book project, "Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Biblical Studies," unapologetically points a critical finger at anthropocentricism for the widely recognised devastation of the eco-system. In

other words, the biblical hermeneutics of this book is eco-friendly (Cf. the extensively referenced "Earth Bible" project by Norman Habel).[1] The unique strength of this book, in the context of the global discussion on environmental degradation, is its holistic examination of the mindset behind the ecological catastrophe. This examination is done by various African scholars and scholars from the African diaspora taking note of contextual anthropological culture, religious belief, indigenous African knowledge systems, historical and current biblical hermeneutics, gender-based power imbalances and racial, class and economic imbalances.

The project utilises the African and biblical perspective that recognises oppression as generic, multi-faceted and challengeable in all its domains in order to successfully uproot it. The contributors point out that from historical to contemporary mentality in social culture, religion, inter-human relationships and dealings with nature, human beings have been guilty of exploitation, power imbalances and oppression of fellow members of the Earth community (Dube 2015). From the afore-mentioned generic issues, the book "Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Biblical Studies" zooms in on oppressive racial and class relations, gender relations, ways of relating with Mother Earth and biblical hermeneutics.

Among other contributions to scholarship, the book adds African indigenous ways of doing hermeneutics. For example, Musa W. Dube employs an African folk story-telling method as she makes a theatrical presentation of creation in her paper, "Genesis 1: An Earth-Friendly Reading." Another example, Mark S. Aidoo, adds an African-sage reading strategy in his use of Akan proverbs to present an earth-friendly interpretation in "'Woe to You, O Land, when Your King Is a Child' (Ecclesiastes 10:16-19): A Dialogical Study on Qoheleth's Imagination of Ecology with African Proverbs."

---

[1] Norman Habel has written and edited extensively using an ecojust biblical hermeneutical framework in works like *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (2000), *Seven Songs of Creation: Liturgies for Celebrating and Healing Earth* (2004) and *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (2008).

Set within the African context, the book constantly evokes – and sometimes outrightly invokes – the African idea of interrelatedness that is identifiable in the Botho/Ubuntu worldview, which asserts that community includes "the living, the divine and the environmental community in an interconnected fashion" (Dube et. al 2016).[2] This all-empowering interrelatedness is arguably the original worldview of human societies before humanity erroneously supposed that technology was superior to nature. The book's newness is to be found in this interrelational, multi-faceted deconstruction of the current environmental disaster. Indeed, Still We Rise Together as fellow members of the Earth community (Cf. the foreword above). Thus, the book's contribution to scholarship is a hermeneutic that intersects issues of environmental conservation, gender equality, socio-cultural and racial relations and biblical interpretation. The book owes its gendered title (Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Biblical Studies) and gendered content to the Circle of Concerned African Theologians, an Africa-wide scholarly society of Women that specialises in a hermeneutic that seeks the liberation of women and other oppressed members of society. This project will be found to empower in various degrees the following historically disadvantaged members of Creation, namely: Earth and nature, Africa and the African diaspora, The two thirds world, and Women and the economically oppressed.

Bible, Earth, Gender and African Womanist Issues

The 30th anniversary of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in July 2019, at the University of Botswana marked an important milestone in the life of the Circle. As in an African palaver, the celebration of this anniversary, brought together in a Conference scholars from 17 African countries and other members that are located

---

2 Dube, Musa W., Tirelo Modie-Moroka, Senzokuhle D. Setume, Seratwa Ntloedibe, Malebogo Kgalemang, Rosinah M. Gabaitse, Tshenolo Madigele, Sana Mmolai and Doreen Sesiro. (2016, Spring). Botho/Ubuntu: Community building and gender constructions in Bots-wana. Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre, 41, 1-20.

throughout the African diaspora, with close to eighty papers prepared and presented around the theme, "Mother Earth and Mother Africa in the Religious Imagination." In the words of Musa Dube (2019), the thrust of this Conference and the attendant efforts was to "explore the link between gender, environment and religion" within the wider context of a marauding exploits of the destruction of the Earth by humans. The goal was to investigate and imagine positive perspectives from our religions, philosophies and literatures in reclaiming the Earth as a cradle of our existence and the basis of our continued survival. Towards this end, and for purposes of managing the Conference, papers presented were subdivided into thematic areas which informed the organisational design of this volume.

Though many of the papers that were grouped under the sub-theme, Mother Earth and Biblical Studies have found their way into this volume, a number of other papers fell through the cracks. Reflections done in this volume acknowledge the devastating effects of humans' irresponsibility on Mother Earth through longstanding attachment to anthropocentric, patriarchal and androcentric interpretive tendencies (Habel 2004) of biblical texts as well as exploitative, oppressive and violent human behaviours on the Earth (Francis 2015:#104). All of this form part of a long legacy of ambiguous and half-hearted concerns if not outright complicity of Western Christian theologies with biblical interpretations underlying modern ecological crisis (White, 1967). Lynn White's "The historical roots of our ecological crisis" represented a critique of a dominant view which saw Christianity, through its Bible reading tendencies, and Western technological advances, dancing together in their enchantment for a human mastery over nature (Conradie 2004:124). Though not well received by Christian academia, White's book shook the entire Christian community from slumber and set the tone for a more critical appraisal of the relationship between biblical interpretation and oppressive attitude towards nature (Palmer, 1992; Berry, 2006; Ruether, 1992).

While not many Christian scholars agreed with White's line of argument that Western Christian tradition had a role to play in the problems of modern ecological crisis, but that his article became a watershed in placing environment on the agenda of the Christian church in new ways could not be ignored. The technological advancements and the resultant exploitation of the natural resources by humans were too obvious to ignore (Horrell, 2014). These tendencies were all too often

legitimised by Christian ideas, concepts, symbols, liturgies and discourses (Conradie, 2004:125).

The Consultation on Religion and the Environment of November 1997, held in Adelaide in Australia – which led to the Adelaide declaration, The Earth Bible principles, the Guiding Ecojustice principles and the development of Ecological Hermeneutics – was one of the by-products of a longstanding debate on the relationship between Christian tradition and the environment and the former's role in the devaluation of the Earth and its relationship to humans. One of the most critical issues that emerged out of this consultation was the re-affirmation of religious people on the sacredness of the Earth and their commitment to the struggle for reclaiming justice for the Earth community. Equally critical was a shift from theology of environment in general to the need to read the biblical text in the light of ecological concerns in particular. It was this shift that catapulted Norman Habel and his Earth Bible Project, with its feature of "Earth Consciousness" onto the scene.

Despite its penchant for developing a form of reading that consciously subverts the anthropocentric, patriarchal and androcentric approaches, its status as a full fletched hermeneutical approach took time to develop distinct contours. The three subsequent consultations in 2004, 2005 and 2006 provided an opportunity for a more refined articulation of (what was to be known as) ecological hermeneutics with contributions from team members evenly spread out in terms of gender, race and geographical location. Contributions emanating from the Earth Bible Project team represented not only a radical departure from the manner in which Biblical scholars had always interacted with texts but also a change of attitude towards the Earth and all forms of life, human, non-human characters as indispensable players in the cycle of reciprocal beneficence.

With ideas gleaned from feminist hermeneutics and other forms of reading a solid foundation for a more distilled ecological hermeneutics was spotted and expanded by Habel (2008) and his team. Their creative use of the Earth Bible and Ecojustice principles as well as the interpretive lenses of suspicion, identification and retrieval opened the boundaries for a more resourceful, Earth-friendly and yet critical interaction with the text. Through the lens of suspicion, colonising ways of reading patent in anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies are laid bare

and faced up to. Identification has created a space in which all elements of Earth could dance freely in a liberating interdependence (Dube2000:123) and kinship. From the Bible new insights have been made and novel features have been retrieved in the Biblical text as a result of the application of the ecojustice principles. Central to the ecological hermeneutics is, therefore, a radical change of posture from viewing Earth as a voiceless, topic and a human instrument to appreciating it as a relative, a dialogue partner and a subject with a voice.

Armed with these principles and gifted with the attitude, efforts have to be made to restore worth and value to the Earth; embrace it as our kith and kin and continually struggle together for justice. The Bible has always been an important book for Christianity. Its interpretation has however been very problematic given the contexts in which it was born and the new conditions to which it had to be related. New circumstances demand a reading and re-reading if the Bible is to be good news and a life-giving book to not only humanity but also to other non-human characters who have suffered immensely under the traditional Biblical interpretive methods. With new challenges, new questions emerge and new solutions have to be sought. The relationship between destruction on the environment and gender-based violence in more pronounced than ever before. Their cry for justice more demanded than ever before. It is under such conditions that the Bible has to be re-read in ways that restore life and worth to Earth as a dialogue partner than as a commodity to be exploited.

There are strong intersections between ecological, feminist, and womanist hermeneutics as the concept, "Mother Earth" indicates a gender component, necessitating gendered analysis of the role of the earth and environment in Judeo-Christian interpretations and traditions. The title of this book, "Mother Earth, Mother Africa, and Biblical Studies," reflects the intersection of Earth, Africa, gender issues, and the need for liberating interpretations of biblical texts. The reference to "Africa" specifically reflects the social-locatedness of the contributors and the centrality of Africa and African diasporean contexts in perspectives used by those authors.

Additional concerns of ecological, feminist, and womanist biblical scholars are the ways that other non-human objects are featured and gendered in biblical texts; how environmental issues intersect with other systems of oppression; the past, present, and future relation-

ships between women and the earth/land; and how environmental issues disproportionately affect African and other women and people of colour, persons of lower socio-economic status, and other marginalised, minoritised and colonised groups. These issues and relationships are investigated in order to depict, expose, interpret, theorise, and reimagine social categories and hierarchies, Judeo-Christian thought, the Bible, earth and female oppression, and in order to propose and embody eco-friendly and liberating biblical perspectives and hermeneutical approaches. It is imperative to note that the ancient communities that produced the sacred text did not know about existing environmental problems that are of major concern in our contemporary contexts. However, scholars of various disciplines but, especially biblical studies perceive that dialogue between the two contexts, ancient and contemporary, can produce critical and hopeful insights that will enable us to respond to environmental and human crises of our time.

Biblical scholars note the ways that biblical interpretations, most notably the Genesis creation narratives, have been traditionally anthropocentric and used to assert human domination of the earth/nature and male domination of women. Prominent member and recently appointed coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Musa W. Dube engages in the combination of postcolonial, feminist, and ecological biblical hermeneutics. She offers socially-located ecological readings of biblical texts to expose the multiple and simultaneous ways that the earth and women are oppressed in biblical narratives. Dube affirms the intrinsic worth of the earth and of women, and charges readers to consider and value the ways that women and the earth offer assistance to members of the community as well as how women challenge oppressive systems through powerful actions and words. She challenges biblical interpreters to pay attention to imperialistic rhetoric inscribed in biblical texts and the universalising interpretations of these texts.[3] One such universal interpretation is the domination or colonisation of the earth. The language of "domination" is rooted in imperialism and patriarchy. For Dube, these interpretations not only reinforce patriarchy and androcentrism, but also

[3] Musa Dube, Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).

they assert problematic Western feminist assumptions, perspectives, and imperialism[4] which exacerbates the destruction of earth's resources.

Many biblical scholars understand issues of ecology, gender oppression, and violence as interlocking issues and have combined the crises under the terms *ecofeminism* and *ecowomanism*. Both terms reflect upon women's relation to the earth and their embodiments of and relation to both nature and the divine. The term *ecofeminism* was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne and refers to a diverse range of women's environmental activity and ecological issues that impact women generally. It is a framework for examining the link between environmental and gender injustice and for determining solutions to eradicate these injustices.[5] *Ecowomanism*, on the other hand, was coined by scholars Pamela Smith and Shamara Riley.[6] Melanie Harris describes ecowomanism as a framework for "critical reflection and contemplation on environmental justice from the perspectives of women of African descent and other women of colour."[7] While both frameworks recognise that environmental injustice intersects with multiple forms of oppression, Harris' framework focuses on how women of colour particularly "have often survived multiple forms of oppression when confronting racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism,"; that "androcentric attitudes devaluing the earth and privileging (particular) humans over the earth's wellbeing has resulted in the crisis in which we all find ourselves,"[8]; and the subsequent activism that women of colour engage in to eradicate environmental injustices. Harris' and other ecowomanist's frames recognise the connections between racial, gender, and environmental injustice. Harris notes, "ecowomanism stands in a prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power and cutting through

---

4 Ibid, 24.

5 Françoise d'Eaubonne, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort,* (Paris: P. Horay, 1974), 87.

6 Melanie Harris, "Ecowomanism: Black Women, Religion and the Environment," *The Black Scholar 2016 46 (3):29.*

7 Melanie Harris, *Ecowomanism, Religion, and Ecology,* (Brill, 2017), 1.

8 Ibid, 1; Harris maintains that Black women that embody a spiritual connection with the earth, lives, bodies, and intellectual contributions to environmental justice have been marginalised, devalued and abused by white scholars and intellectual practices based on white supremacists and patriarchal structures.

normative practices of white supremacy, hierarchal dualism, and patriarchy by validating and starting with black women's earth stories."[9]

Both eco-feminism and eco-womanism enable scholars to recognise and critique intersectional oppressive systems such as racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, environmental injustice, colonialism, etc. and at the same time, challenge ideologies and social practices that lead to the abuse of the earth and women. Biblical scholars analyse biblical imagery and language to make claims about ecological and gender concerns. They note that implications of environmental injustice are rooted in systematically oppressive systems and reimagine biblical texts and oppression of women and other subordinate members within communities. Ecofeminist and ecowomanist biblical scholars assert that all are connected, human and non-human, and that we should act accordingly, to ensure the health and wellbeing of each member of the community, especially Mother Earth who Dube cites as co-creator with God that ensures the continuity of creation.[10] Valuing the earth and engaging in ecological hermeneutics enable biblical scholars to recognise human destructive behaviours and imagine the potential, power, and contributions of the earth and nature to facilitate the sustainment of life and as a resource to improve the quality of life.

Abuse of the earth exacerbates the abuse of girls and women. For centuries, Mother Earth and Mother Africa have been exploited and abused by humans and colonisers, who took their most precious and valuable resources for capitalistic gain. In addition, African(a) girls and women have been physically and sexually abused and trafficked, and far too many continue to be taken, transported, and traded within and from Mother Africa all across the globe, deprived of their human rights and dignity. When humans pollute and disregard the earth, women and children's health are contaminated primarily. In fact, the entire community is contaminated since women literally birth communities. However, because of social hierarchies, privileges, and biases, and misuses and abuses of power, African(a) girls' and women's health and lives are disproportionately sabotaged. Therefore, an aim

---

9 Ibid, 2.

10 See Musa Dube, "And God Saw it was Very Good": An Earth-friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis" in *Black Theology an International Journal,* December 2015, 13 (3): 230-246.

of eco-womanism is reconciliation of the relationship between people and nature, and the achievement and maintenance of commonweal,[11] which Layli Phillips define as the state of collective well-being; the optimisation of well-being for all members of a community.[12]

Biblical scholars also note the material representativeness of the Bible. Ann Elvie writes, "words on a scroll, page, or screen are not possible without the plants from which paper of papyrus and ink are produced and fossils and ricks from which the plastics of a CD-ROM and the parts of a computer are formed." She asserts that biblical readers and interpreters are supported by and need to recognise their dependence on the Earth community for their sustenance.[13] Dube adds, "The core of the destruction of the earth is the failure of human beings to regard themselves as interconnected with other members of the Earth Community."[14] This includes the failure to perceive God as a member of the Earth community that dwells on Earth, which Dube maintains, is consistent with Genesis 1:2 which states that in the beginning, "the Spirit of God was hovering above the waters of the Earth."[15] In addition, Dube emphasises that the Earth remains the major custodian of creation through continued production of vegetation, animals and water creatures. As such, the earth is partner and co-creator with God, giving birth to both living creatures and vegetation. Dube points out however, that a legacy of the designation of earth as female and co-creator is that Mother Earth and women were made more susceptible to oppression and exploitation. Ironically, the representation of earth as female also subjected her to narrative erasure and marginalisation similar to the ways that biblical writers normalise the erasure of many of the female characters in biblical stories. Emphasising the interdependence of the earth and humans, scholars bring ecological and gender concerns, including race and class environmental health disparities and environmental toxicity, from the margins to the centres of our interpretive processes and, advocate for more ethically responsible

---

11 Layli Phillips, *The Womanist Reader,* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), xxix.

12 Phillips, xxv.

13 Ann Elvie, "Ecofeminism and Biblical Interpretation," *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, edited by Bron Taylor (2010: Continuum.

14 Dube, 234.

15 Ibid, 236.

readings that recognise the contributions of all of nature and reinforce earth ethics.

The Earth in African Biblical Studies

The popular African axiom, often attributed to great Sub-Saharan statesmen, captures how the connection to land was lost to the African: "When the white man came to Africa, he had the Bible and we had the land; the white man said let us pray; after the prayer, he had the land and we had the bible." This axiom defines a critical time when colonised Sub-Saharan Africans lost their land to the ideologies of subjugation of colonialism, imperialism, land commodity and capitalism. However, this did not cease with colonial, capitalist and imperial practices for land degradation, the environment (or Earth), climate change and loss of biodiversity plague Africa and her citisens. Mother Earth Mother Africa notes the crisis Earth is plagued with. The fast paces of climate change and Earth's citisen's impacts on the environment and reduction of biodiversity has never been more urgent. Puleng LenkaBula contends that "ecological destruction, to a large extent, is related to hyper-capitalism" (2008:376). All, these have had effects on communities' livelihoods. Mother Earth and Mother Africa's relationship and concern to the African cosmology and land degradation calls forth Earth citisens to interrogate all the challenges Earth is embattled with.

Various African cultures have articulated indigenous practices in which the cosmos or earth, the universe, land and human life were all in unison. In their article, "Botho/Ubuntu: Community Building and Gender Construction in Botswana" (2016), Dube et al note that in African, Botho/Ubuntu social practices understands that "community is widely understood to include the living, the divine, and the environmental community in an interconnected fashion" (2016). Furthermore, the imperative question of land has a spiritual reverence and connection to the lives of people. LenkaBula (2008), Dube (2016) and others have discussed Africa's ethnicities and clans' relationship to

land and nature. One of the examples they discuss is the inter-connection to the environmental community which is demonstrated through the practice of totem. In this practice, both LenkaBula and Dube et al note, African communities self-identify with particular animals. There is an ethnicity that identifies with crocodile and another with the elephant. This, Dube et al noted "underlines that the botho/ubuntu understanding of community includes a web of relations that are not anthropocentric" (2016:3).

The origins of the degradation of Mother Earth was first articulated White's classical essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967) in which he argued that the destruction of the universe is due to colonial, capitalist and imperial readings of the biblical Genesis imperative. White argued that "human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny that is, by religion" (1967:1205). White argued that the Genesis imperative gave the western worlds to subdue the non-western world.

In *The Earth Bible*, Norman Habel writes we are faced with a "new ecological crisis" Personalising and humanising Earth, Habel argues that citizens of Earth are beckoned to hear the groaning, utterings and gnashing of Earth's teeth due to their own behaviour. Habel's proposal of the Earth Bible is the "the rise of a new Earth awareness where all forms of life are seen as endlessly dependent on the new complex relationships that allow life to flourish on Earth" (2000). Habel's the Earth Bible Project proposes six eco-justice principles of reading Earth through the intersection of biblical studies with the ecology, and environment.

Habel's six eco-justice principles enable scholars to test the "validity of the text and contemporary culture" (2000) for our reading of Earth in biblical and religious texts. Some African scholars take issue with the principles, insisting that the principles are secular over and against their religiosity. Some argue that the Bible must also be appropriated to the modern context as the historical contexts of the Bible do not at all articulate ecological tenets or address ecological crises. However, three of the Habel's eco-justice principles are important to the reading of Earth in African Biblical Studies.

i. **The principle of interconnectedness:** Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.

ii. **The principle of voice:** Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.

iii. **The principle of purpose:** the universe, Earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.

Habel and his cohorts have suggested that the Earth hears and feels the effects on its body. Boateng writes that "Earth is home to all. And if Earth is home to all, then we must engage in actions that lead to sustainable development for all Earth" (2020:162). The Earth in African Biblical Studies present a triad intersectionality of Earth and biblical studies exegesis and eisegesis. The Earth is signified as environment, African cosmology or land appears in African biblical studies.

In "Beyond Anthropocentricity: Botho/Ubuntu and the Quest for Economic and Ecological Justice in Africa", LenkaBula argues that botho/ubuntu is an imperative norm int eh drive for "ecological justice against exploitative human relations, economic systems and power issues, particularly in the use of and sharing of biological resources for South Africa and Africa is important" (2008:377). She argues that botho/ubuntu "demonstrates its ethical imperative for ecological justice" once it is linked to ecology. LenkaBula, however, notes and argues that for botho to be relevant, we first need to move beyond the "anthropocentric interpretative frameworks associated to botho" (2008:377). Botho/Ubuntu, is therefore, significant for "personal, political, socio-economic and ecological justice in African religious-cultural life" (2008).

In her article, "And God Saw that It Was very Good..." Dube offers a dramatized and Earth-centred reading against the grain of "anthropocentric perspectives" of Genesis 1 (2015:230). Dube argues that Genesis 1 beckons us to "re-think our relationship with the Earth" (2015:231). Dube notes that the reader of Genesis plays a vital role in "keeping the God standard for the Earth and all its members" (2015:232). The reader is summoned to "empathise with the creator

God" (2015:232). This reading proposes an ecological justice with focus on the "sacredness and goodness of all creation" (2015) and identifying and reinterpreting ideological perspectives that devalue the Earth.

Readings of Earth and Earth community continue in Ucheanwaji G. Josiah's work. Josiah's reading synthesises God, Earth and the Earth community as the basis for his exploration of "viewing biblical hermeneutics from an African Ecological lens" (2015). Josiah argues that the Bible "contains ecological narratives is an undeniable fact. And that the Bible could be ecological relevant to Africa and Africans is incontestable" (23). Engaging Hosea 4:3 "this is why your land is in mourning, and everyone is wasting away. Even the wild animals, the birds of the sky, and the fish of the sea are disappearing" (2015:23). Josiah argues that the Hosea text portrays the "earth as an actor who acts in bringing about certain consequences resulting from the Israelite misconduct" (2015:23) and Earth is "an actor in the ongoing relationship between Yahweh and Israel" (2015: 24).

However, reading Mother Earth Mother Africa should not be relegated to either religious institutions or contexts, but must also be politically and socially motivated. The political shaping and advocacy against the destruction of land and the Earth (or environment) is articulated in Ebenezer Yaw Blasu's "The Bible and Caring for the Land: African Theocology as Christian Impulsion for Creation Care" (2020). For us to care for Mother Earth and Mother Africa, a "moral responsibility for creative care needs" (2020) must be insisted upon. Blasu proposes African Theocology as a form through which our moral responsibility and ethical care of the Earth will be deployed. African Theocology is the intersection and interaction "between God (the Supreme Being) as Creator and His Creations (human and nonhuman), particularly the role of humanity in these relationships from the perspectives of God, and conservative Science and in the context of African religiosity" (2020:4). Through African Theocology, we explore "conservation science, African religious worldviews, eco-regulations and rituals, interpreted as much as possible within biblical texts" (2020:5). But this doesn't cease with Biblical studies and God's interaction with creation, it takes cognisance of African theistic and precarious views of creation, their Africans sense of kinship with creation, and their African anthropocentric valuing of humanity" (5). Blasu suggests the African primal

theistic religious perspective the Sokpue-Eve and how it views "ecological sin" in "breaking the ecological taboos, incurring the wrath of mauu (God) which results in troku" (2020:5) has hope that anthropogenic degradation can transform Mother Earth and Mother Africa.

Arrangement of the book

The book has five divisions. The first section is called "The Landscape: Earth, Bible, Gender and the African Context," and is an introductory survey. The second section, called "Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Hebrew Bible narratives," interprets some Hebrew Bible narratives against the background of ecological justice, gender and the African cultural context. The third section is "Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Ancient Jewish Philosophical Worldview," which deals with certain sagely, moral and priestly matters from the contemporary African worldview. The fourth section, namely "Mother Earth, Mother Africa and the New Testament," consists of one chapter which interrogates practical problems that pertain to the African context, environmental conservation and gender justice. The final section, vis., Section E, is titled, "A Student's Engagement", and has a chapter by Seboifo M. Pabalinga. This chapter makes a survey of green literature and biblical theology. The book is structured as follows:

Section A: The Landscape: Earth, Bible, Gender and the African Context

This section lays the foundation for the book by exploring the historical and contemporary scholarly work on the interplay of biblical hermeneutical strategies, environmental preservation, gender justice and the African context. By so doing, it introduces the content, arguments and chapters of the book. It contains the following chapters: the editorial by the four editors of the project, namely Sidney K. Berman, Paul L. Leshota, Malebogo Kgalemang and Ericka Dunbar; the mapping chapter called "30 Years of African Women's Biblical Studies" by Alice

Yafeh-Deigh, and Musa W. Dube's "Genesis 1: An Earth-Friendly Reading."

Section B:
Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Hebrew Bible narratives

The section presents interpretations of biblical texts from the Hebrew Bible within the contemporary African context from a gender liberative and ecojust perspective. The chapters in this section are "Stories we know: empire, land and gender in the book of Ruth" by Sidney K. Berman and "The Eco-feminist Reading of the Story of the Birth of Moses" by Paul L. Leshota.

Section C:
Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Ancient Jewish Philosophical Worldview

Section C presents texts from an ancient Jewish philosophical worldview, particularly in the areas of sage wisdom, morality and priestly rituals. The chapters apply gender empowering and eco-friendly interpretations to these sagely, moral and ritualistic issues within an African context in the texts of Ecclesiastes 10:16-19, Genesis 8:20–9:17 and Leviticus 25 respectively. They are as follows: Mark S. Aidoo's "Woe to You, O Land, when Your King Is a Child" (Ecclesiastes 10:16-19): A Dialogical Study on Qoheleth's Imagination of Ecology with African Proverbs' and; Kenosi Molato's and Musa W. Dube's "Towards a Setswana Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: The Example of Genesis 8:20-9:17".

Section D:
Mother Earth, Mother Africa and the New Testament

There is only one chapter in this New Testament section. It is "Living Water: Quenching thirst in unexpected spaces" by Nina Muller van

Velden and it applies the person and mindset of Jesus Christ to contemporary ecological issues, the African context and gender imbalances.

Section E: A Student's Engagement

The chapter in this section, "Some Biblical Literature, Earth-Based Creation Stories and Ecological Justice" by Seboifo M. Pabalinga, generally surveys Bible-related literature on creation, especially which presents Paul's theology. Pabalinga's analytical survey takes a critical perspective that supports the preservation of Mother Earth and an eco-friendly hermeneutic.

Overview of the Content (Sections A – D)

In **Section A**, the chapter by Alice Yafeh-Deigh, "30 Years of African Women's Biblical Studies," lays the foundation by surveying the history of biblical interpretation by African women since the inception of the Circle of Concerned Africa Women Theologians thirty years ago. The author starts with the pioneers of African women's theology like Mercy Oduyoye from Ghana, Brigalia Bam from South Africa, Daisy Obi from Nigeria, Isabella Johnstone from Sierra Leone and many others. It discusses the reading strategies and the scholarly struggle for liberation by African women theologians until the present day. The next chapter of Section A, namely, "Genesis 1: An Earth-Friendly Reading," invites the reader to an ecojust theatre where the pleasurable drama of creation presents all members of the earth community – not only human beings – as highly valuable. Her hermeneutic takes aim at the traditional anthropocentric mindset and proposes an all-empowering ecological and gender-balanced perspective.

Section B starts with Sidney K. Berman's insightful chapter called "Stories We Know: Empire, Land and Gender in the Book of Ruth." The discussion revolves around the interplay of issues of empire, religion, land, environment and gender in the narrative of Ruth, as was

common in colonial contexts. From a gender empowering perspective, the chapter critiques and proposes an alternative to the colonialists' misguided sense of moral superiority over the indigenous. The false sense of moral superiority always escalated to a system of racial discrimination, the entitlement to dominate, abuse and massacre the indigenous, and to cruelly exploit the locals' natural resources and environment. Berman reconstructs a liberating hermeneutic for appropriate relationships with Mother Earth and with one another. Next follows the thought-provoking chapter by Paul L. Leshota titled "The Ecofeminist Reading of the Story of the Birth of Moses (Exodus 2:1-10)." The chapter's interpretation of Exodus 2:1-10 explores the story of the birth of Moses from the perspectives of land, environmental preservation as well as gender empowerment and liberation. The chapter evokes the person of Moses in connection with the topic of liberation both of the oppressed and the oppressor and its implications for gender justice, the struggle for land and the environment. Leshota discusses the ways in which such perspectives can help in reimagining relationships among people and between human beings and Mother Earth.

Section C opens with Mark S. Aidoo's culturally rich "'Woe to You, O Land, when Your King Is a Child' (Ecclesiastes 10:16-19): A Dialogical Study on Qoheleth's Imagination of Ecology with African Proverbs." The African context is captivating in this chapter filled with proverbs from the Akan of Ghana which, when immersed into the text of Ecclesiastes 10:16-19, shed light on Qoheleth's imagination of ecological justice. The text proclaims that the land is blessed when leaders exercise their responsibilities with maturity but is cursed when immature persons are in control. How do Africans imagine leadership and its effects on land care? This question is tackled to yield Earth friendly insights into leadership in Africa. The second chapter of Section C, which focuses on Genesis 8:20-9:17, is co-authored by Kenosi Molato and Musa W. Dube. The authors tackle the human moral degeneration that led to God's punishment of all creation by the flood and rightly ascribes to it the current ecological disaster. They explore Earth-friendly approaches towards biblical interpretation and in particular, how some Setswana perspectives on the environment can lead to environmentally conservative ways of reading the Bible.

The chapter in **Section D**, written by Nina Muller Van Velden, deals with the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John

4:5-42. It is called "Living Water: Quenching thirst in unexpected spaces." Muller Van Velden makes a gender-empowering reading in the light of chronic water shortage in Cape Town and other parts of Western Cape in South Africa. She recognises the gross disadvantage of women and low-income communities in contrast with males and the wealthy. The transgressive and transformative character of the dialogue is interpreted to encourage contemporary readers to reframe their identity in ecological terms that invoke care and concern for all of God's creation. Thus, in this chapter, the complex intersection of power, gender, ecology, justice, and hermeneutics are placed on the table for creative exploration.

Conclusion

What emerges from all the contributions is that ecological concerns cannot be side-lined as they are central to all aspects of society: economic, social, political, and religious as attested in analyses of biblical texts in this volume. The book, therefore, provides an opportunity for researchers to venture into mutually inclusive projects in biblical studies, eco-justice, gender, and cultural studies in the quest to address the different catastrophes that plague the communities of Mother Earth.

References

Ademiluke, Salomon O. (2009). "An Ecological Interpretation of Leviticus 11-15 in an African (Nigerian) Context." *Old Testament Essay* 22/3, 525-534.

Blasu, Ebenezer Yaw. (October 2018). "The Bible and Caring for the Land: African Theocology as Christian Impulsion for Creation Care." retrieved from www.researchgate.net/publication/328383003, July 2020.

Conradie, E. 2004. Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project. *Scriptura* 85: 123-135.

Dube, Musa W. 2019. An Interview during the Opening of the Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians at the University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana.

Dube, Musa W. (2015). "And God Saw that it was Very Good": An Earth-Friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1". Black Theology, Vol. 13 No. 3, 230-246.

Dube, M. 2000. *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. Missouri: Chalice Press.

Dube, Musa W., Tirelo Modie-Moroka, Senzokuhle D. Setume, Seratwa Ntloedibe, Malebogo Kgalemang, Rosinah M. Gabaitse, Tshenolo Madigele, Sana Mmolai & Doreen Sesiro. (2016, Spring). Botho/Ubuntu: Community building and gender constructions in Botswana. *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre*, 41, 1-20.

El Zowalaty, Mohamed E. (2020). Environmental Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic – a lesson for the future. *Infection Ecology and Epidemiology,* 10 (1), DOI: 10.1080/20008686.2020.1768023

Habel, Norman C. (2000). "Introducing the Earth Bible" in *Reading from the Perspective of Earth*. Edited by Norman C. Habel. Sheffield: ShAP, 2000.

Habel, Norman C (ed.) 2000. *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*. Sheffield: ShAP/Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.

Habel, Norman C. 2004. Seven Songs of Creation: Liturgies for Celebrating and Healing Earth. London: ShAP.

Habel, Norman C. 2008. Introduction. In N.C. Habel & P. Trudinger (Eds.) Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics. Atlanta: SBL: 1-9.

Horrell, 2014. *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology*. London: Routledge

Kavusa, Kivatsi J. (2019) "Ecological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Biblical Texts Yesterday, Today and Onwards: Critical Reflection and Assessment." *OTE* 32/1: 229-255.

LenkaBula, Puleng. (2008). "Beyond Anthropocentricity-Botho/Ubuntu and the Quest for Economic and Ecological Justice in Africa". *Religion & Theology* 15: 375-394.

Palmer, C.A. 1992. *Process Theology and Ecological Theology*. Theology in Green 1.

Ruether, RR. 1992. Gaia and God: *An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. Harper & Collins Publishers.

The Hindu 2020. Covid-19 Lockdown-Like Interventions May Help Combat Air Pollution in India, Say Scientists. www.thehindu.com.

White, L 1967. The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis. *Science* 155, 1203-7.

Wikelski, Martin, & Avolio, Carla. 2020. Covid-19 Reveals Human Impact on Wildlife. *Max Planck Institute of Animal Behaviour,* Radolfzell/ Konstanz, *www.mpg.de* .

Worldometer, 2020. Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic. Retrieved August 25th 2020 from www.worldometers.info/coronavirus .

II. MAPPING CHAPTER: 30 YEARS OF AFRICAN WOMEN'S BIBLICAL STUDIES

Alice Yafeh-Deigh

Introduction

In recent decades, research in the field of biblical studies has expanded rapidly because of the emergence of new methodological paradigms to research in biblical studies. The new methodological approaches have significantly broadened the scope of biblical interpretation to include interpreters' voices from many social locations. The proliferation of these new interpretive methods has driven the final nail in the coffin of scientific objectivity assumed in white, hegemonic, Eurocentric paradigms for biblical interpretation. For too long, the field of biblical studies has been structured and controlled by the historical-critical paradigms. As R. S. Surgirtharajah rightfully notes, "the discipline is strongly marked by paradigms set by a few Western scholars, paradigms that are limited by their biases."[1] The historical-critical reading strategies are rooted in enlightenment ideologies; they are based on white-male Eurocentric scholars' values and views, the power holders."[2] The frameworks emphasise disinterested objectivity in the reading and interpretive process while muting that the interpretive process is not neutral but feeds into particular ideologies.

By striving for scientific objectivity and assuming that a disinterested inquiry was possible, dominant male Eurocentric interpreters were

---

1 R. S. Sugirtharajah, Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World (New York, Maryknoll, 2006), 494.

2 Shelby F. Lewis, "Africana Feminism: An Alternative Paradigm for Black Women in the Academy," *in Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils* (ed. Lois Benjamin; Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 49.

able to "keep the marginalised in their allocated places, with the master supplying the labels."[3] The power-holders often assess and conclude that most emergent approaches to biblical interpretation are subjective. Such appraisal leads to "the practice of treating American and European interpretation as the interpretation and labelling the enterprise of others 'Asian,' 'African,' and so on, or of using gender or ethnic terms persists."[4] The new evaluative paradigms are already demolishing the centre itself—historical-critical methods—and redrawing biblical interpretation parameters.[5]

To be sure, newer methods or perspectives are conscious of the current commonplace assumption that biblical interpretation is a located practice that "cannot avoid particular location, interest and perspectives, and interpretive construct."[6] New Testament scholarship now employs a variety of approaches, including the contextual approach. The contextual approach is conceptually incorporated under the broader cross-disciplinary framework of cultural studies models. The Cultural studies model provides an overall, comprehensive critical perspective "from which to look not only at the production of meaning in the past but also at ways the Bible and contemporary culture mutually influence each other."[7]

The cultural studies model encompasses a diverse range of hermeneutical frameworks.[8] A crucial presupposition of cultural studies is

---

3 Sugirtharajah, Voices from the Margin, 4.

4 Sugirtharajah, Voices from the Margin, 1.

5 Sugirtharajah, Voices from the Margin, 9.

6 Richard Horsley, *Paul, and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000), 13. See also Rudolf Bultmann et al., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller; New York: Harper, 1961), 191. cf. Roger Lundin, *From Nature to Experience: The American Search for Cultural Authority* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 172.

7 J.C. Exum and S.D. Moore, *Biblical Studies, Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (JSOT Sup 266; Gender, Culture, Theory 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 19.

8 Cf. J.C. Anderson and S.D. Moore, eds., *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 181.

that social location helps readers read the Bible a certain way; hence, diversity in interpretation derives from the difference in social location.[9] Consequently, "it is in the nature of cultural studies to resist and critique the imposition of a single, fixed, authoritative meaning and to favor multiple hermeneutical approaches to texts and multiple meanings."[10] The model is explicitly counter-hegemonic in orientation based on its heightened emphasis on the situatedness of its activities. Scientific objectivity or neutrality is not the ideal or telos in a cultural studies approach. The fact that it stresses the significance and importance of social location on the interpretive process implies that it does not claim to be immune to being subjective. Cultural Studies practitioners admit that the interpretive process is a dialogical negotiation process, a process of consent and resistance, appropriation, and distanciation.[11] Readers or interpreters of the Bible are not merely passively receiving and appropriating meaning from the biblical texts; they construct and make meaning from the texts as the texts are reread and recontextualised within distinct social locations. Thus, an essential task of contextual biblical interpretation, a distinctive approach within the broad ambit of cultural studies methodologies, is to underline the constant dynamic interplay between text and interpretive context. From thence, the diversity of approaches validates hermeneutical subjectivity and finds value in the experiences of women and people of color (ethnic minorities) within academia. Far from merely according to preponderance or importance to each reader's cultural and social location, contextual biblical interpretation

---

9 Cf. Fernando Sergovia, "Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic," in *Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah; Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2008), 33-44.

10 Alice Yafeh-Deigh, Paul's Sexual and Marital Ethics in 1 Corinthians 7: An African-Cameroonian Perspective (Bible and Theology in Africa; New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2015), 3.

11 Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics* 11 (trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 133.

equally stresses the need for dialogue among interpreters from diverse social locations.[12]

Fundamentally, therefore, contextual approaches to biblical inter-pretation encourage reading practices profoundly rooted in readers' lived experiences. Then,

> What also needs to take place is the recognition that context is a necessary interpretative ingredient that should be consciously explored and promoted so that not only the contextual influences and strategies of mainline scholars are accepted as legitimate contextual by-products of the investigative enter-prise, but also that the contextual perspectives of marginalised communities be recognised as appropriate interpersonal determinants of and challenges to text interpretation.[13]

It is within a very broad spectrum of cultural studies that African women Biblical Studies should be understood (hereafter, AWBS). AWBS is part of the new wave of approaches to biblical interpretation. More significantly, it is part of a growing body of gender-centric practices that are consciously entrenched in decolonising and deconstructive rereading and reinterpretation of the Bible. AWBS created a conscious paradigm shift in biblical interpretation by privileging the experiences of the women on whose behalf they are interpreting the

---

[12] Vernon Robbins succinctly summarises this need for a dialogic approach to biblical interpretation: "We must engage in dialogical interpretations that include disenfranchised voices, marginalised voices, recently liberated voices, and powerfully located voices. We must learn how to embed our oppositional strategies in many forms and styles of rhetoric so that we enable free and open discussion and controversy in an environment where we keep our colleagues on an equal playing field and keep the issues in an arena of specificity rather than staging them as typical actions to be attacked. Moving forward, spiraling, stepping in place, turning around, and changing venue, we explore with each other, debate with one another, and disagree with each other as equals, inviting other voices into the dialogue in a manner that makes a rhetorical full-turn through scientific, humanist, malestream, feminist, ethnic, geographical, racial, economic, and social arenas of disputation, dialogue, and commentary" (Robbins, "The Rhetorical Full-Turn in Biblical Interpretation: Reconfiguring Rhetorical-Political Analysis," in Stanley Porter (ed.), Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 58-59.

[13] Brian K. Blount, Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 85.

biblical texts. They place African women lived experiences at the centre of their analysis. In doing so, they decentre and decolonise Eurocentric, masculinist perspectives on the Bible. AWBS has adopted a wide range of heuristic tools shaped not out of the world of scholarship alone, but out of the political, social, spiritual, cultural, and multiplex realities that define the African woman's experiences. The premise that undergirds AWBS works is that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to beat him at his own game temporarily, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."[14] Lorde's claims resonate deeply with AWBS' struggles within the field of biblical studies, an area that is still deeply entrenched in white Eurocentric epistemologies, policies, and beliefs. AWBS did not find particularly the historical-critical method a viable option in their struggles to problematise, destabilise, and dismantle the master's house to make room for silenced or erased voices of minoritised groups. Therefore, to erect the distinctive kind of house that critically engage African women's lived cultural and religious realities, AWBS forged different contextual tools and promoted different biblical interpretative paradigms.

Another guiding principle is that differences among African women are essential strengths.[15] By interlacing *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation and life with distinctive forms of cultural hermeneutics, AWBS can challenge the boundaries that impede them from genuinely positioning their interpretive paradigm in relation to the respective social location that provides them a distinctive vantage point of reading the Bible. This unique stance helped fuel AWBS's advocacy stance and commitment to pursue social transformation, promote human flourishing, and enhance African women and their communities' quality of life.

This chapter's overall objective is to map the development of AWBS within the last three decades since the creation of the Circle of Con-

---

[14] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," In Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Berkeley: Crossing, 1984), 112.

[15] Cf. Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," I11.

cerned African Women Theologians (the Circle, hereafter). The mapping here will be done by assessing the variety of contextual approaches African women scholars use to investigate the Bible. The fundamental goals here are fourfold. First, the paper will broadly contextualise the emergence of AWBS within the Circle and uncover the methodological perspectives adopted by AWBS since the inception of the Circle. The paper will show that the launching of the Circle was a momentous event with disruptive power aimed at building and fostering an allied organisation essential for fighting against social, religious, economic, and political barriers to women's empowerment. Second, the paper will use "inculturated feminist hermeneutics," "feminist cultural hermeneutics," and "postcolonial feminist hermeneutics" as broad umbrellas for exploring several contextual approaches used in AWBS. Third, the paper will offer illustrative examples of how the various methods opened new avenues for contextual biblical interpretation in Africa. Finally, the paper will conclude with a discussion of the implications of the mapping for the future of AWBS. A few caveats are in order. This paper takes on the complex and delicate task of mapping scholarly work that has been done by African women in the field of biblical studies since the emergence of the Circle. The scholarship of AWBS is far too extensive to be treated adequately in a limited number of pages. As a result, as with all mapping or surveys, the paper will merely be touching on the tip of the iceberg without fully engaging the various works critically.

1. The Context of African Women Biblical Studies: The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

Before charting the field of AWBS during the last three decades, the paper begins by contextualising the history of AWBS within the Circle. Unfortunately, an in-depth discussion of the history and work of the Circle is well beyond the scope of this paper.[16] In the following,

[16] For a helpful discussion of the origin and development of the Circle, see Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Story of a Circle," *The Ecumenical Review* 53 (2001), 99; Nyambura Njoroge, "Talitha Cum! To the New Millennium: A Conclusion," in

the paper summarises salient features relevant to the development of the fields of AWBS. Many important events contributed to the launch of the Circle.[17] However, the watershed moment came when Mercy Amba Oduyoye and some eighty women inaugurated the Circle in Accra, Ghana, in 1989. The historic event of the Circle brought together and intertwined women's experiences from diverse geographical, cultural, ethnic, religious, theological and linguistic backgrounds. Dube's definition captures the very essence of the Circle:

> "A 'circle of women' describes those who are seated together, who are connected and who seek to keep the interconnected-ness of life. It signifies life as a continuous flowing force, which must continue to be nur-

Talitha Cum: Theologies of African Women, (eds. N.J. Njoroge & M.W. Dube; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 245-259; idem., "The Missing Voice: African Women Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 77-83; Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Doing Theology in Community: The case of African Women Theologians in the 1990s," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 68-76; Musimbi Kanyoro "Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle," in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri, D.B. Govinden & S. Nadar; New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 15-38; Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "Gender Equity and Empowerment in African Public Theology: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians" (lecture, the Annual Hendrik Kraemer Lectures, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2015); Teresia M. Hinga, "African Feminist Theologies, the Global Village, and the Imperative of Solidarity Across Borders: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18 (2002): 79-86; Mercy A. Oduyoye and Virginia Fabella (eds.), With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Teresa Okure. "Invitation to African Women's Hermeneutical Concerns." *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 14 (2003): 71-95.

17 Cf. Sarojini Nadar, "Feminist Theologies in Africa," in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2012); Oduyoye, Who Will Roll the Stone Away? The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women (Genève: WCC Publications, 1990); idem., "Gender and Theology in Africa Today." Mother Pelican 6, no. 12 (Dec. 2010), available online at: *http://www.pelicanweb.org/solisustv06n12page3mercyoduyoye.html* (20 July 2020).

> tured at all times. A circle of women pursuing theology together in different African contexts is an approach that insists that African women are also a part of creation: they are in the Circle of creation."[18]

The quotation from Dube shows that the history-changing, momentous occasion allowed women to connect while empowering them to redress deep-seated gender-based cultural and religious barriers to economic, political, religious, and social participation. The pan-African Circle forged "a space that is open to dialogue across women's different experiences and standpoints, a space where a multiplicity of women's voices are granted equal air time."[19] There are fundamental points of similarity between African women; they come from cultures that support, reinforce, and promote patriarchy's ideology. Yet, there are some significant differences in expectations and experiences due to major contextual variables. Audre Lorde so appropriately captures the point. Circle women "are not one great vat of homogenised chocolate milk. We have many different faces, and we do not have to become each other to work together."[20] Accordingly, Circle forebears created a space for women with diverse lived experiences and distinctive perspectives. It is an open, honest space where "critical dialogues can take place between individuals who have not traditionally been compelled…to speak with one another"[21] Thus, the Circle space functions for women as a space of resistance and a critical site of radical

---

[18] Dube, "Introduction: 'Little Girl, Get Up!'" in *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (ed. Musa W. Dube, and Nyambura J. Njoroge; Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2001), 11.

[19] Abigail Brooks, "Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: Building Know-ledge and Empowerment Through Women's Lived Experience," in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer* (eds. by Sharlene N. Hesse-Biber and Patricia L. Leavy; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 75.

[20] Audre Lorde, "I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organising Across Sexualities," in *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 19.

[21] Bell hooks, "Culture to Culture: Ethnography and Cultural Studies as Critical Intervention," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press), pp. 123–133, 133.

possibilities.[22] As Dube correctly points out, the Circle "symbolises our space of transformative power of reinterpretation; of our intellectual invigoration and creative energy; of our talking and thinking among us selves in a friendly a life-affirming space."[23]

The safe and life-enhancing space of the Circle provided women moral motivation and commitment needed to become active and positive agents of social change and emancipatory transformation. This radical emancipatory vision connects all African women. The Circle provided women an avenue to form a common front to confront the invisible pandemic of patriarchy, androcentrism, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, and other identity markers. The women come from varied backgrounds, are affected by a complex set of contextual factors, and are differentially constrained by patriarchal gender discrimination.

The Circle's conveners' primary goal has always been to provide a safe, positive, supportive, and affirming environment where African women can come together, reflect, engage in open and honest dialogues with each other and thrive. Circle women come together in lucid and critical socio-political consciousness of gender inequities. The Circle reinvigorates and motivates African women to become more active in the collective struggle to improve women's lived experiences. Circle women took on the monumental task of addressing and dismantling the deeply rooted patriarchal gender-based discriminations at local, national, continental, and global levels.

The Circle became a community of shared support with a commitment to making African women lived experiences salient in Circle members' struggle for gender justice in society, in the Bible, and in biblical interpretations. The locus classicus of Circle women's approaches to reading and interpreting the Bible is the social, cultural, religious, and economic conditions of African women. The Circle fos-

---

22 Bell hooks, "Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness," in *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Political and intellectual controversies* (ed. Sandra Harding; New York: Routledge, 2004), 156.

23 Dube, "Circle Reading of the Bible," *Scriptoratures/Alternation Special Edition* 2 (2005): 125.

tered, promoted, and nourished interdependency among and between women from different backgrounds and cultures. One of the Circle's distinctive features is to promote academic research that pursues social transformation and engages in emancipatory practices for African women's lives in the church and society. Musimbi Kanyoro articulates this overarching mission of the Circle thus:

> The main objective of the Circle women is to write and publish theological literature written by African women from their experience of religion and culture on this continent. Research and writing for publication is our target and sole reason for being. Thus, we are an academic group. We want to fill a gap in African women's profile and theological writings from Africa.[24]

The Circle provided a radically inclusive and empowering space of possibilities for African women theologians and biblical scholars in the academy and church. It created a space that helped women stand together to challenge patriarchal social structures oppressive to women. Communal dialogue and collaborative work among Circle members have fostered a heightened consciousness among African women. Circle women do activist work and provide practical solutions within religious, institutional and community settings where women "are dealing with today's life-threatening/destroying and life-giving/affirming issues." For Circle women, "doing theology means wrestling with God's Word as [they] confront the powers and principalities of this world."[25] Although the Circle comprises pastor and scholars across diverse- theological disciplines, a common denominator is that their theology is constructed from the grassroots up. As such, most Circle women are scholar-activist who do praxis-oriented research. Many women embrace the Bible as a text of liberation that enhances the quality of their lives. They view the world through the

---

[24] Musimbi Kanyoro, "Celebrating God's transforming power," in Transforming power: Women in the household of God (ed. M.A. Oduyoye; Proceedings of the Pan-African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, 1997), 11.

[25] Njoroge, "Groaning and Languishing in Labour Pains," in Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God (eds. Kanyoro and Njoroge; Acton Publishers, Nairobi, Kenia, 1996), 3.

lens of their Christian faith. Bridget Marie Monohan appropriately notes that faith is central, not peripheral to Circle women's vision:

> Members of the Circle assess their experience of culture, religion, biblical interpretation, and social responsibility from a faith perspective. They tell of their pain and their triumph. They speak of their frustration in encounters with Western misinterpretation, negligence, and ignorance of the African female experience. Listening to the Circle is not a passive activity. They write to promote action and to participate in it. Theology, for them, is meaningless unless it is lived.[26]

Before the Circle, only a few women overcame the barriers to women's upward mobility in the academia. The Circle raised greater awareness and exposed the invisibility or underrepresentation of African women at the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Before the inception of the Circle, a significant number of African women have been silent, absent, misrepresented and excluded, and their unique potentials and viewpoints not valued or respected.[27] The Circle's transformation of women's invisibility resonates with Lorde's clarion call that "where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognise our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives."[28] The Circle gave women the necessary space to speak and develop a critical consciousness that would allow them to interrogate, analyse, and dismantle patriarchy and privilege.

In the small action taken by Oduyoye and others, real change for African women theologians and biblical scholars began. Over the last three decades, African women's consciousness has expanded, and more women can break through the glass ceiling of academia. African

---

[26] Bridget Marie Monohan, "Writing, Sharing, Doing: The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians" (BA Honors thesis, Boston College, 2004), 2.

[27] Cf. Musimbi Kanyoro, "Inculturation and the Mission of the Church," in *Inculturation and the Mission of the Church in Nigeria: The Third CIWA Theology Week* 4th–8th May 1992 (eds. J. Brookman-Amissah and J.E. Anyanwu et al.; Port Harcourt: CIWA Publications, 1992), 28.

[28] Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, Berkeley, CA, 1984), 43.

women biblical scholars have been progressively integrated into the guild of biblical scholarship, and their scholarships are valued and recognised. Increasing numbers of African women have entered the traditional Euro-centric male fields of biblical studies and have become professionally trained biblical scholars with many earning PhDs in the field. The Circle's liberatory impulse has equally prompted women to develop new ways of reading the Bible, with the African women's lived experiences as the interpretive starting point.

The formation of the Circle is thus one of the most significant moments that marked the emergence of AWBS. It constitutes a significant starting point in the development of the field of African women's biblical studies. The Circle provides the structures within which AWBS is organised and thrive. AWBS is dedicated to the Circle core mission of promoting and participating in transformative research and publication. Accordingly, research and publication are the central tenets of AWBS. In the last three decades, the Circle has provided a rich platform for collaborative research projects that have further empowered Circle women to transgress gender and racial boundaries in academic and ministerial settings.

Therefore, it is fair to say that since the launching of the Circle, African women's biblical interpretation has increased both nationally and internationally. The formation of the Circle represents an essential point in the academic maturation of the field of AWBS. Since the Circle's inception, African women biblical scholars are welcome partners in the guild of biblical scholarship, participating fully in the SBL along with their Euro-American counterparts. The annual SBL conferences and mini-conferences have become vital sites for African women scholars to meet, present their research, and breed new ideas and new directions for AWBS. The meetings provided academic legitimisation for AWBS. These conferences spurred the growth of AWBS and provided African women scholars with attractive outlets for presenting and publishing their work. African women's biblical scholarship is now an active, recognised, and respected discipline represented in the Society of Biblical Literature's core research journals and books.

Ultimately, therefore, the diversity of African women's biblical interpretations that have proliferated in recent years is the result of the Circle. The awareness created by the Circle has prompted women to

develop new ways of reading the Bible, with the African women's lived experiences as the starting point of the interpretive enterprise. Circle women have been engaged in discussing a range of biblical interpretative issues related to African women's lived realities from diverse perspectives and using different methodological approaches. Emergent approaches in AWBS responded to concerns raised by the Circle. The approaches privilege the voices, experiences, and concerns of African women in alignment with the Circle's themes. The umbrella conceptual frameworks of "inculturated feminist hermeneutics," "feminist cultural hermeneutics," and "postcolonial feminist hermeneutics" are used to frame and organise the scope and diversity of approaches in African women's biblical studies. They will show how the field the AWBS has developed over the last three decades.

2. African Women's Biblical Studies: A Review of Scholarship since the inception of the Circle

This section highlights significant methodological frameworks engendered by African women in their reading and interpretation of the Bible since the birth of the Circle. More specifically, I contextualise the diverse approaches in AWBS as responding, explicitly and implicitly, to the fundamental goals of the Circle. As noted above, although there is much to be gained by reviewing individual contributions, it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a detailed discussion of the scholarship done by AWBS in the past three decades. On a broad scale, I must stress the various methodological approaches— "inculturated feminist hermeneutics," "feminist cultural hermeneutics," and "postcolonial feminist hermeneutics"—ally themselves with or are forms of contextual interpretations.[29] This means that the frameworks will provide a stable platform for understanding and discussing

[29] By the use of the adjective "feminist," I am inferring Alice Ogden Bellis' broad definition of the term. She rightly states, "feminism has a long history. No one definition would satisfy all feminists; rather, a range of understandings is needed. Nevertheless, feminism may be broadly defined as a point of view in which

fundamental interpretive theories and positions that have been put forward by AWBS. More generally, however, *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation is undoubtedly the thread that weaves the diverse approaches together and gives Circle women's work its distinctive emphasis.

3. Current Trends in the Field of African Women Biblical Scholarship

A. *Talitha Cum* Hermeneutics of Liberation

This mapping does not determine which approaches best reconfigure and recontextualise biblical interpretation within African women's lived experiences and social locations. The working assumption here is that the diverse approaches are shaped by a strong commitment to social change in alignment with the Circle's missional imperatives. The Circle strives, among other things, to address the unique realities of African women in their distinctive social locations. It is precisely the emphasis on women's lived experiences that generate overlapping reading strategies. The approaches are integrative. They have common attributes and transformative potentials, but they effectively and appropriately address their distinct communities. Given the intricacies of African women's social experiences of inequalities, AWBS cannot use a silo approach as an interpretive framework. It would dangerously essentialise African women and ignore their differences. AWBS reading paradigms purposefully illuminate or spotlight cultural and gender features of the biblical texts that address the unique problems they face. Obviously, in accentuating certain features, they equally ignore other elements. Therefore, to explore and grasp the full range of the meaning potential of any text, a wide range of reading paradigms are necessary. Ultimately, then, AWBS eschews a one-size-

---

women are understood to be fully human and entitled to equal rights and privileges" (Alice Ogden Bellis, Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994], 6).

fits-all approach that does not take readers' context into consideration. Instead of a single-axis, it employs multiple-axes frameworks for re-reading and re-interpreting biblical texts.

Since the Circle's establishment, *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics of liberation has been an essential theoretical and liberative lens that has guided Circle women's diverse hermeneutical practices.[30] The foundational biblical text that underpins the *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics is the intertwined stories of the woman who suffered from a haemorrhage for twelve years and the twelve-year-old daughter of Jabirus in Mark 5:21-43.[31] The twelve years in the two distinctive accounts have correlative symbolism and meanings with a restorative justice emphasis. The intercalated stories highlight the celebration of healing and life. The stories invite all women to get up and right the wrongs of erasure, invisibility, powerlessness, incredibility, and other interlocking forms of life-denying oppressions. Like the haemorrhage sister and the little girl, contemporary African women must rise from "the death of living under various colonising powers, of living under various patriarchal powers, of living under poverty, disease, war."[32]

In making *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation central to African women's gender-centric frameworks, AWBS strives to build dimensions of representational unity across differences. A central tenet of *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation is Interconnectedness and interdependence through liberative praxis. Therefore, *Talitha cum* hermeneutics focuses on interrupting and dislodging religious, traditional, and cultural practices that have been instrumentalised to create, maintain, perpetuate, normalise, and legitimise discriminatory policies and practices against women. Stressing the liberative emphasis of *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics of life, Odoyoye exclaims, "from the raising of Jairus' daughter, Circle women remind themselves again and again that silence can be read as death; from the woman who

---

30 Cf. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, eds., *The Will to Arise: Women. Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992). Nyambura Njoroge and Musa Dube, eds., *Talitha Cumi! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001).

31 Cf. Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise*.

32 Dube, "Talitha Cum! A Postcolonial Feminist & HIV/AIDS Reading of Mark," 92.

'touched' Jesus, Circle women have learnt to create space for themselves, even in places where traditional taboos forbid them to be."[33]

Congruent with *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation and life, the inaugural Circle conference in Accra, Ghana, invited the women of Africa to wake up, arise,[34] and to speak "loudly and clearly against various manifestations of violence in the contemporary African context, particularly violence against women."[35] Since the Circle's launching, *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation and life has become the quintessential clarion call for African gender justice and women's awakening. It invites African women to arise, interrupt, problematise, dismantle, and eliminate entrenched social and religious systems of gender inequities. The call has not gone unnoticed or unheeded. Circle women heeded the call to rise from death; they accepted "the invitation to walk in hope in the face stark hopelessness."[36] They made their voices heard in a variety of ways.

Oduyoye, Njoroge, Dube, and Tshehla have explicitly and consistently used *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation to underpin and structure their analysis of the Bible.[37] These women unequivocally engage

---

33 Oduyoye, "Rereading the Bible from where we have been placed: African women's voices on some Biblical texts," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 10 (2007): 4.

34 Cf. Kanyoro "Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle," in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 24. Dube, "Talitha Cum! Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible," pp. 133-146. In *Semeia Studies: Twenty-Five Years of Liberation Theology* (eds. Botha; Atlanta: SBL, 2009) at *https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327751706* (20 June, 2020); Teresa Okure, "The Will to Arise: Reflections 8:40-56," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (eds. Mercy A. Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 221-30.

35 Teresia M. Hinga, "African Feminist Theologies, the Global Village, and the Imperative of Solidarity Across Borders: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18 (2002): 82.

36 Dube, "Talitha Cum! A Postcolonial Feminist & HIV/AIDS Reading of Mark," 83.

37 Oduyoye, & Kanyoro, (eds.), Talitha Qumi, Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians, (Daystar, Ibadan, 1990); Njoroge, "Talitha Cum! to the

critical forms of resistance, reclaiming life-giving and life-enhancing strategies that confront and dismantle cultural and religious institutions that collectively promote and uphold discriminatory policies and practices against women and girls. As Dube puts it, "African women's *Talitha cum* hermeneutics means living and insisting on staying alive, even when confronted with oppressive powers that crush. One dares to rise."[38] The common thread in *Talitha cum* mode of analysis is an unwavering commitment to fight against "life-denying forces" in powerful hegemonic cultural and religious institutions and traditions. These "life-denying forces" likewise reinforce and perpetuate exclusionary, androcentric interpretations of the Bible. Thus, *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics of life underscore African women's liberating struggles and shared concern to address the multifaceted and interlocking discriminations that women confront daily. Accordingly, Oduyoye insists forcefully,

> Our story is one of letting it be known that African women are awake. They have heard Jesus say 'Talitha cum' (Mark 5:41). Cultural expectations that kept us 'behind the curtain' are being exposed. Disempowering religious teachings are being challenged. We are awake to our responsibility as creative beings made in the image of God. The Circle has motivated African theologians to pay more attention to what culture and religion do in women's lives.[39]

The *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation woke up Circle women to a lifelong collective commitment to engage in gender justice-oriented interrogation and dismantling patriarchal social and religious structures oppressive to women. Given that religion is one of the strongest social institutions that create and justify patriarchal hierarchies, and

---

New Millennium," 245–259; Maarman S. Tshehla, 2019, "Gendered African (biblical) scholarship: An ode to Talitha," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(1), a5294. https://doi.org/ 10.4102/hts.v75i1.5294

[38] Dube, "Talitha Cum! Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible," 18; Dube, "Talitha Cum: A Postcolonial Feminist and HIV/AIDS Reading of Mark 5:21-43," in *Grant Me Justice: HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible* (eds. Musa W. Dube and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004),115-40.

[39] Oduyoye, "The Story of a Circle," *The Ecumenical Review* (2001), 99; Njoroge, "Talitha Cum! To the New Millennium," 99.

that it is an essential shaper of attitudes in African societies, *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation is rooted in women's faith experiences. *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation immensely help women forge new ways of being and living as women of faith. It functions as an emancipatory social transformation of beliefs and practices within and outside religious, cultural, social, and political structures in diverse contemporary contexts in Africa. Overall, emancipatory healing from entrenched life-denying structures is "healing from colonial, patriarchal, physical oppression, or basically everything that is oppressive."[40] Such holistic healing is critical and essential to ensuring that African women have voice and agency. Consequently, the *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation and life foregrounds, connects, and reinforces African women's interpretive strategies.

B. Inculturated Feminist Hermeneutics

The assumption that women's lived experiences have a central place in the interpretive process has obtained widespread currency in AWBS. I mentioned earlier that contextual biblical interpretation provides context and a starting framework in which the diverse *Talitha cum* oriented gender-centric and liberationist methods and theories used in AWBS operate. It is important to note that the gender-centric frameworks are not entirely reinventing the wheels. Most of them are using existing theories or theologies but putting their spin on the already existing approaches. Examples of such theories or theologies are inculturation and liberation theologies, to name a few. Both theologies provide the background to Oduyoye's feminist inculturation theology. As is the case for feminist cultural hermeneutics, inculturation feminist hermeneutics draws from inculturation and liberations theologies. It is grounded metho-dologically on a gender-centric analytical framework. African inculturation and liberation theologies emerged in the 1960s. They focused almost exclusively on culture,

[40] Dube, "Talitha Cum! Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible," 20.

class, economic, and political questions primarily from an androcentric perspective while ignoring or treating gender issues as aides. Liberation and inculturation theologies converge in that they both emerged as a response to "a certain dissatisfaction with the traditional theological model which has proved unable to address some of today's problems, and from the growing awareness that theological elaborations always address problems within a certain cultural context."[41] The various modes of inculturation and liberation theological probing "subscribe to the imperative of contextualisation, according to which theologies are formulated to respond to different cultural contexts."[42] They equally operate "from the common recognition that part of colonial oppression was the belittling of African cultural values and systems."[43]

As a result, proponents of inculturation modes of theologising strive "to 'Africanise' in the sense of affirming African culture and positioning it as the basis for developing African liberation theology."[44] Inculturation methodologies foreground African religion and culture, and reconfigure and recontextualise Scripture and Christian traditions within African culture and traditions.[45] As Justin Upkong states, "in inculturation hermeneutics, the past collapses into the present, and

---

41 Justin S. Ukpong, African Theologies Now: A Profile (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1984), 5; *idem.*, "Developments in Biblical Inter-pretation in Africa: historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends (Boston: Brill, 2001), 14.

42 Simeon O. Ilesanmi, "Inculturation and Liberation: Christian Social Ethics and the African Theology Project," *The Annal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 15 (1995): 50.

43 Ilesanmi, "Inculturation and Liberation," 51.

44 Kanyoro. "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Con-tribution to Theology in the 21st Century," in *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 167.

45 Ary Roest Crollius maintains, "the purpose of inculturation is not to salvage a traditional culture, but rather to render present the galloping process of change which affects all cultures in the light and life of the Gospel, so that each culture may come a worthy "habitat" of God's pilgrim people — a tent rather than a fortress — and an irradiating light that adds to the splendour of the entire cosmos" ("Inculturation and the Meaning of Culture," *Gregorianum* [1980], 273).

exegesis fuses with hermeneutics."[46] They operate from thoroughgoing contextual emphasises. Accordingly, the African context is centralised as the subject of theological and cultural reflections.[47] The theological emphasis of inculturation theology is on contextualising the Gospel's emancipatory message within different cultural contexts; in other words, the methodology stresses the need for the Christian faith and God's living word to take flesh in specific cultures and communities. Even the catholic pontiff, Pope Paul VI, recognised the importance of a decentralised and contextualised application of the Bible. In an apostolic letter in 1971 titled "*Octagesima Adveniens*," he acknowledges that the biblical message is not timeless nor transcultural, and insist, "in the face of such widely varying situations, it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyze the situation with objectivity proper to their own country."[48]

Like inculturation forms of theologising, African liberation theologies equally contextualised Christian theologies with a specific focus on social change and transformation from the African people's unjust economic, political, and social conditions. Liberation theologies carried on a frontal attack against social injustice and systemic oppression, particularly economic injustice of all kinds. The theologies emphasise socio-political and economic structural and systemic reforms and transformation. Dube notes, "liberation theology rose from a context of resisting both imperial oppression and deformation of people through exploitation, racism, and dispossession."[49] Its struggles for

---

[46] Justin Ukpong, "Inculturation hermeneutics: An African approach to Biblical interpretation" in *The Bible in a world context: An experiment in contextual hermeneutics* (eds. D. Walter & L. Ulrich; William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), 18.

[47] Cf. Loreen Maseno, "Gendering Inculturation in Africa: A Discussion of Three African Women Theologians' Entry into the Inculturation Scene," *Norwegian Journal for Missions* 4 (2004): 225.

[48] Pope Paul VI, "Octogesima Adveniens," section 4, May, 1971 <*http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html*> (21 June 2020).

[49] Dube, "Postcolonialism & Liberation," in *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation* (ed. Miguel A. De La Torre; St Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 291.

liberation correlates with the decolonising vision of postcolonial biblical interpretation. While inculturation theologies took roots or became primarily established in eastern and western African countries, liberation theologies were particularly prominent in South Africa, where black South Africans were engaged in liberative struggles against the repressive, discriminatory, and dehumanising systems of apartheid.

The fundamental problem with African liberation and inculturation theologies is that they side-tracked or failed to acknowledge and redress gender imbalances or historic power differentials between men and women in both religion and society. Both theologies' theological activities did not address structures of gender inequities or oppressive traditions, beliefs, and practices within the African patriarchal and religious cultures. Since gender concerns were peripheral to the discussions of inculturation and liberation, women were left in the shadows of the methodologies. As a direct response, gender justice became the cornerstone of feminist inculturation theological efforts.

Oduyoye, the leading practitioner of feminist inculturation and liberation theology, shows a clear continuity with the inculturation and liberation paradigms in that her mode of analysis is likewise contextually grounded; however, it thoroughly interrogates and contests discriminatory cultural and religious traditions, beliefs and practices from the perspectives of African women's lived realities.[50] Odoyoye is emphatic that "no Christianity that ignores the oppression of women should be made at home in Africa as Christ cannot be at home in a domination-riddled Christianity."[51] The different forms of feminist inculturation theologies, such as those used by Odoyoye, Kanyoro, and Loreen Maseno, aim to interrogate and dismantle oppressive and

---

[50] Cf. Oduyoye, Hearing, and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986).

[51] Oduyoye, Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy (Orbis, Maryknoll, NY 1995), 87.

dehumanising patriarchal structures of African societies and religion.[52] They take seriously the reality that men and women are differently positioned within cultural, social, religious, economic and political hierarchies that disproportionally affect their lives. Ultimately, feminist inculturation theologies have a robust commitment and determination to resist and challenge cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices that reinforce women's social and religious subordination. Feminist inculturation theologies note that it has been more difficult for women to receive theological education and hold significant leadership positions throughout history. Yet, women's involvement and participation in Christian religious practices are disproportionately greater than men's. Oduyoye further observed that within the African patriarchal cultural and religious systems, "women's experience of being persons primarily in relation to others—as mother or wife—predominates in Africa. A woman's social status depends on these relationships and not on any qualities or achievements of her own."[53] Therefore, feminist inculturation theologies are determined on "incorporating women's cultural experience and including a commitment to the emancipation of women into inculturation."[54] The gender-transformative emphasis is substantiated because inculturation male theological and liberative struggles are geared toward "the liberation of only half of the African people if they overlook the abject poverty of women."[55] Kanyoro most forcefully and unabashedly expresses

---

52 Cf. Oduyoye, & Kanyoro, (eds.), *Talitha Qumi, Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians* (Daystar, Ibadan, 1990); Loreen Maseno, "Gendering Inculturation in Africa: A Discussion of Three African Women Theologians' Entry into the Inculturation Scene," *Norwegian Journal for Missions* 4 (2004); Kanyoro. "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the 21st Century," in *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001); Njoroge, "Talitha Cum! to the New Millennium"; Tshehla, "Gendered African (biblical) scholarship."

53 Oduyoye, Hearing, and Knowing, 122.

54 Maseno, "Gendering Inculturation in Africa," 226. Cf. See Oduyoye, "Violence against women: window on Africa," *Voices from the Third World* 18 (1995): 168–76.

55 Kwok Pui-lan, "Mercy Amba Oduyoye and African Women's Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20 (2004), 10.

her disappointment with inculturation theology as articulated by African male theologians. She states, "While affirming the need for reclaiming culture through the theology of inculturation, we African women theologians claim that inculturation is not sufficient unless the cultures we reclaim are analyzed and are deemed worthy regarding promoting justice and support for life and the dignity of women."[56] Usually, Circle women highlight the positive and empowering features of the African culture while critiquing cultural norms that contribute to the reproduction, legitimation, and perpetuation of existing multifaceted inequalities and guarantee the maintenance of power in men's hands. Kanyoro appropriately asserts that to right the wrongs of inculturation theologies, African women must continue the Christian faith/African cultural integrative and transformative work through a gender-centred feminist approach. Maseno insists that gendering or gender-centric inculturated investigation is essential because it integrates "a strategic and social understanding of women as a distinct group, thereby incorporating women's cultural experiences and including a commitment to the emancipation of women into inculturation."[57] A gender-centric perspective is required to ensure that the multiple struggles of women are addressed. Oduyoye straightforwardly challenged male theologians to critical reflections on gender bias and the resultant subordinated positions of African women in religion and society. Circle women recognise that African women have many male allies who have publicly stood up in emancipatory solidarity with African women in their struggles for gender justice and transformative patriarchal cultural and religious praxis. African Women theologians have equally made "overt efforts to promote collaboration with African male theologians."[58]

---

56 Kanyoro, *Introducing feminist cultural Hermeneutics*: An African perspective (Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 2002), 167.

57 Maseno, "Gendering Inculturation in Africa," 226.

58 Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Major challenges for African women theologians in theological education (1989–2008)," *International Review of Mission* 98 (2009):117.

C. Feminist Cultural-contextual Hermeneutics

An essential tenet of Feminist cultural hermeneutics is its analytical focus on African culture, religion, practices, and traditions. It has an unapologetically gender-sensitive and thoroughgoing contextual emphasis. It takes on the monumental task of dismantling deeply rooted patriarchal cultural, religious, and gender oppressions. In many ways, inculturated feminist and cultural hermeneutics reveal a shared vision. The approaches seek to provide a corrective to the androcentric dimensions of traditional inculturation and liberation hermeneutics. They interrogate and challenge inculturation and liberation theological processes that, while highlighting their marginality, uphold the patriarchal status quo to the point they transmit cultural and religious ideologies that reinforces and legitimate structures of oppression against women. Inculturated feminist and cultural hermeneutics engage African religious and cultural beliefs and practices with hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval. Their central vision is to forge a holistic gender-centre analysis of culture and religion that acknowledges and builds on inculturation and liberation theologies. The approaches share a strong commitment to unmasking facets of culture and religious practices that do not promote women's liberation. However, they do not only engage in suspicious hermeneutics or simply claim the mantle of opposition; inculturated and feminist cultural hermeneutics equally retrieve cultural and religious traditions and practices that engender liberation and transformation. Kanyoro, feminist cultural hermeneutics' paradigm pioneering leader, calls attention to the fact that "female genital mutilation, early betrothal and marriages, and the stigmatisation of single women, barren women and widows are not liberating to women."[59] Kanyoro's quote crystallises the underlying principle that not all cultural and religious practices are liberative or transformative. Accordingly, feminist cultural hermeneutics scrutinise religious-cultural beliefs and traditional practices that shape biblical and African contexts.

[59] Kanyoro, Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics, 15.

Kanyoro elucidates the need for a paradigm shift to establish effective gender justice strategies:

> The patriarchal nature and context of the Bible complicate its function as a primary resource in African women's struggle against the subjugation and domination of women. African women theologians have developed cultural hermeneutics as an important tool that enables women to interpret their experiences and realities in their contexts. These cultural hermeneutics involves critical analysis and a hermeneutic of suspicion of both the context of the Bible and the contemporary cultural contexts in which interpretation occurs. Therefore, African feminist biblical studies, with necessity, involves cultural hermeneutics as an important first step. [60]

While Kanyoro concedes that inculturation and liberation hermeneutics are valid approaches in that they take the African lived realities as an essential starting point for their theological and hermeneutical analyses, she censures both methods for the lack of committed attention to existing gender inequalities in religion and culture. In so doing, the approaches unavoidably reinforce male privilege and do nothing to change women's situations. Feminist cultural hermeneutics is committed to prioritising liberation and gender justice concerns, and, consequently, it places African women experiences at the centre of its investigation. As Dora Mbuwayesango states, feminist "cultural hermeneutics are an essential hermeneutic of liberation for African women who experience multiple cultures and multiple oppressions."[61] The approach provides a more in-depth conceptual framework for contextualising African women's lived experiences.

Congruent to Oduyoye's inculturated feminist approach, Kanyoro further stresses that gender-centric frameworks are indispensable for foregrounding the gender dimensions of inculturation and liberation

---

60 Kanyoro, "Biblical hermeneutics: ancient Palestine and the contem-porary world," *RevExp* 94 (1997): 364; cf. in Dora Mbuwayesango, Feminist Biblical studies in Africa," in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 79.

61 Mbuwayesango, "Feminist Biblical studies in Africa," 79.

struggles. She upholds oduyoye's book, *Daughters of Anowa*, as an excellent example of engendered cultural hermeneutics because she takes the contextual perspectives of African women and their communities, particularly the Akan community, as a crucial starting point for her hermeneutical forays.[62]

Feminist cultural hermeneutics approaches biblical texts as both cultural and religious texts that need cultural recontextualisation; as such, Kanyoro asserts, "the book of Ruth is loved because it has something for everyone in Africa. Africans read this book in a context in which famine, refugee status, tribal or ethnic loyalties, levirate marriages, and polygamy are not ancient biblical practices but the everyday realities of today."[63] Feminist contextual or cultural hermeneutical practices value multivalent interpretations given that interpreters read from multiple social locations and subject positions. The approach is a useful tool for the African social location because it is an integrative, culturally grounded framework suitable for addressing the complexities of African women's diverse lived experiences.

Although there are some fundamental commonalities and similarities in patriarchal structures across different African societies that allow for generalisations regarding women's experiences, how women experience patriarchy and gender injustices differs depending on women's various positions within patriarchal institutional and social structures. Put differently, while acknowledging the interconnected gender injustices experienced by African women, discrimination is experienced differently by women of different ethnic and religious groups, cultures, and socio-economic classes. A case in point is that African women scholars' positional and social vulnerabilities to gender discrimination are quite different from those of grassroots women. Therefore, African women intellectuals must reflexively analyze their positionality in terms of power and privilege, so they are not re-inscribing hierarchical, elitist intra-gender behaviour rather than

---

62 Kanyoro, Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics, 19; *idem*., "Reading the Bible from an African Perspective," *Ecumenical Review* 51 (1999):19.

63 Kanyoro, "Reading the Bible from an African Perspective,"22.

free from it. Recognising and acknowledging differential social vulnerabilities and differential institutional and structural obstacles among African women is essential to forging authentic solidarity among women without erasing or muting their unique vulnerabilities.

To avoid some of the pitfalls of decontextualising African women's experiences, Circle women biblical scholars and theologians have engaged in wide-ranging modes of contextual interpretations that offer context-specific responses to women's concerns. Each hermeneut comes to the interpretive process with context-specific questions and concerns and uses a contextual method of analysis adapted and appropriate for that context. Consequently, because of the uniqueness of the interpretive situation, the conclusions are substantially different.[64] Apart from the shared *Talitha cum* emancipatory orientation of their work, African women do not have an umbrella concept that aptly describes and captures the contextual, multifaceted nature of their approaches. Therefore, Mbuwayesango is right when she notes, "Usually, the African women's interpretation method is not specified. It is only the location of the person doing the interpretation that is particularised either by country or ethnicity."[65] Space constraints do not permit me to present a detailed description of the different feminist cultural hermeneutical approaches developed and implemented by Circle women. I will briefly highlight a few, but I will not discuss them in detail. Hence, I apologise in advance if I overlook vital contributions to the richness of African feminist or gender-centric cultural hermeneutics.

The various forms of feminist cultural hermeneutics discussed here examine the Bible's specific cultural, economic and political context and the social location from which they reread and recontextualise biblical texts. Kanyoro, rereading the book of Ruth with the rural

---

64 Cf. Blount, Cultural Interpretation, 175–76.

65 Mbuwayesango, "Feminist Biblical studies in Africa," 74.

women of Bware through the lens of their lived experiences and realities, allows her and Bware women to reclaim the Bible as a source of liberation and a guide for combating gender oppression. Kanyoro uses a storytelling approach to serve as the Bware women's communal theological mode par excellence because it fits the women's conceptual framework.[66] Sarojini Nadar investigates representations of sexuality, gender expectations, and demands in the book of Ruth and Esther. Her contextual investigation utilises a South African-Indian Womanist/ feminist body hermeneutical lenses. Her contextual feminist approach highlights female body abuse issues, sexual violence and erasure within the post-apartheid, postcolonial South-African context.[67] Dorothy Bea Akoto-Abutiate works on proverbs and the notion of cultural grafting. She uses the "hermeneutic of grafting" to talk about the intersections of Proverbs 25:1-29:27 and the Ghanaian folk proverbs, precisely the Ewe folk proverbs, and the possibility of grafting the Ghanaian and the biblical book of proverbs. Her contextual reading allows the Bible, particularly the book of Proverbs, to become a relevant and transformative word of God within the Ghanaian social locations.[68] Funlola Olojede employs the Yoruba woman as a contextual interpretive lens through which she reassesses Deborah (Gen. 35:8) and Sheerah characters (First Chron. 7:24). Olojede's contextual hermeneutics broadens the semantic range of the word "wisdom" to include marginal characters like Deborah and Sheerah in the category "Woman Wisdom." Through her contextual rereading of the

---

66 Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 23.

67 Sarojini Nadar, "A South African Indian womanist reading of the character of Ruth," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa w. Dube; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 159–75; idem., "Texts of Terror -The Conspiracy of Rape in the Bible, Church and Society: The Case of Esther 2. 1-18," in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Oduyoye* (eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri & Sarojini Nadar; New York. 2006), 77-95. For other African women who have written on the Book of Ruth, Cf. Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "African 'Ruths,' Ruthless Africans: Reflections of an African Morde-cai," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2001), 237-251.

68 Dorothy Bea Akoto-Abutiate, Proverbs, and the African Tree of Life: Grafting Biblical Proverbs onto Ghanaian Eve Folk Proverbs (Leiden: Brill 2014).

book of Proverbs and Yoruba texts that exhibits the most important interpretive parallels —Yorùbá proverbs and Ìjálá chant —, Olojede interrogates and disrupt the widespread androcentric and patriarchal power relations that foster depreciatory representations of the Yoruba woman in literary, cultural texts.[69] Dora Mbuwayesango reads the stories of Sarah and Hagar from a Zimbabwean woman's perspective. [70] Like Mbuwayesango, Nicoletta Gatti reexamines the theme of childlessness and infertility in the Hebrew Bible, with particular reference Isaiah 56:1-8. She reconceptualises and recontextualises the themes within a Ghanian, Krobo social location.[71] Alice Yafeh-Deigh employs a tri-polar "Afro-feminist-womanist" paradigm to reassess the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon's policy on pre-conversion polygyny and its practical implications on women and children. Yafeh-Deigh situational ethics draws on Paul's theology of marriage and sexuality in 1 Corinthians 7. Yafeh-Deigh argues that although "polygynous relationships cannot fully embody mutual and reciprocal self-giving because the relationships operate within deep-rooted cultural presuppositions that are oppressive and asymmetrical,"[72] ethicists and policymakers cannot be the only decision-making authorities in the matter. The decision-making process must involve all stakeholders, including women and children. Furthermore, the decision reached should be

---

69 Funlola Olojede, "Unsung heroines of the Hebrew Bible: A contextual theological reading from the perspective of Woman Wisdom," Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, 2011; "Being wise and being female in Old Testament and Africa: Old Testament wisdom, human dignity and the poor," Scriptura 111 (2012): 472-479; Olojede and Masenya, "Sex and Power(lessness) in Selected Northern Sotho and Yorùbá Proverbs: An Intertextual Reading of Proverbs 5-7," in *Reading Proverbs intertextually* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 217-30.

70 Mbuwayesango, "childlessness and woman-to-woman relationships in Genesis and in African Patriarchal society: a Zimbabwean woman's Perspective (Gen. 16:1–16; 21:8–21)," *Semeia* 78 (1997): 27–36

71 Nicoletta Gatti, "The Drama of Infertility: Reading Isa 56:1-8 From A Krobo Perspective," *Horisons in Biblical Theology* 40 (2018): 115-141; "*Toward a Dialogic Hermeneutics: Reading Gen. 4: 1-16 with Akan Eyes*," *Horisons in biblical theology* 39 (2017): 46-67

72 Yafeh-Deigh, Paul's Sexual and Marital Ethics, 202.

"oriented towards positive and substantive change in the lives of women and children."[73]

Madipoane Masenya offers another approach to reading and interpreting the Bible contextually. She reconceptualises the African inculturation hermeneutics within a gender-centric framework labeled *bosadi* (Womanhood) biblical hermeneutics. There is an increasing use of Masenya's *bosadi* hermeneutics as an important context hermeneutical model. The trailblazing *bosadi* hermeneutics is a praxis-oriented approach geared towards liberative and trans-formative inculturated biblical interpretations. Masenya has used the approach to engage in inculturated liberationist rereading of the book and Esther[74] and the book of Ruth,[75] to name a few. To contextualise the *bosadi* approach, Masenya prioritises the lived realities of grassroots African women of Northern Sotho. She argues that the women's context is "characterised by sexism, post-apartheid racism, and classism, among other facts."[76] Crucially, the approach "highlights the significance of the element of faith in the life of an African woman in her encounter with the Bible. It also acknowledges the common points between the worldviews of Africans and those of the Israelites."[77] Masenya's articulation of the *bosadi* approach acknowledges the uniqueness of the context of African-South-African women. This explains why, faithful to her specific social location, she uses distinctive experiences the women as the hermeneutical lens to engage in a *bosadi* interpretation

---

73 Yafeh-Deigh, Paul's Sexual and Marital Ethics, 202.

74 Masenya, "Esther and Northern Sotho stories: An African-South African Woman's Commentary," in *Other ways of reading: African women and the Bible* (ed. M.W. Dube; SBL, Atlanta, 2001), 27-49.

75 Masenya, "Ruth," in *The Global Bible Commentary* (ed. Daniel Patte; Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 86–91;

76 Masenya, "Esther and Northern Sotho stories."

76 Masenya, "Proverbs 31:10–31 in a South African context: reading for the liberation of African (northern Sotho) women," *Semeia* 78 (1997): 55–68; "Reading the Bible the Bosadi (Womanhood) Way," *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa* 4 (1997): 15–16.

77 Madipoane, "Their Hermeneutics was Strange," 184.

of the Bible. Masenya insists that the gender-focused *bosadi* approach "is an attempt to resuscitate the African culture from the ashes into which it was thrown; it does not idolise that culture."[78] As such, the *bosadi* gender-conscious framework is not an uncritical rephrasing of inculturation hermeneutics less it threatens to make similar mistakes of upholding and reproducing gender inequalities.

Another important strand of feminist cultural hermeneutics is a dynamic and dialogic engagement between women in the academy and laywomen at the local community level. This cultural hermeneutical strand is called reading the Bible with non-academic readers. The reading strategy aims at fostering the Circle's grassroots advocacy goals. Teresa Okure succinctly summaries the importance of reading biblical texts in dialogue with non-academic readers:

> Our greatest, but not yet fully tapped resources, are these so-called ordinary women. They are close to life at the grassroots; they see themselves in the texts of scripture and respect them as God's abiding word, sometimes too literally and in ways that oppress than liberate them. The professionally trained African women theologians, on the other hand, can be tempted to subscribe to abstract ways of theologising in order to find acceptance in the field. Thus, they can lose focus on life, or seek answers to hermeneutical questions put by others, instead of identifying and addressing their own questions. The sisterhood in reading is needed by all.[79]

Most African Christian women see the Bible as a powerful tool for social transformation that promotes human flourishing and enhances the quality of life. Reading the Bible with non-academic readers goes beyond traditional, devotional Bible study. Reading with non-academic readers is a dialogic approach that uses the powerful tool of storytelling to give laywomen voice and agency. The dialogic method employs an afro-centric gender lens to contextualise and localise biblical narratives within Africa's patriarchal power structures. It encour-

---

[78] Madipoane, "Struggling to Find 'Africa' in South Africa: The Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach to the Bible," *SBL Forum*, n.p. <*https://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?ArticleId=402*> (2 June 2020).

[79] Okure, "Invitation to African Women's Hermeneutical Concerns," *AJBS* 19 (2003): 74

ages laywomen, especially those at the peripheries, to uses their diverse daily-lived realities as the primary entry point to reading and interpreting the Bible. It also invites them to be actively involved and engaged in the hermeneutical process through group discussions. In this context, the goal of reading the Bible with non-academic readers is to provide an empowering space where laywomen can share their experiences to raise awareness about androcentric presuppositions undergirding biblical and cultural portrayals and representations of women. The reading strategy allows women to verbalise or share their experiences, support each other, build solidarity strategies, forge a sense of sisterhood, and work collectively toward social change and transformation propelled by local realities. These various forms of communal readings of the Bible from the margins energise laywomen to "recover old treasures and discover new ones in the household of faith."[80] As Beverly Haddad puts it, the "experiences of survival shape the lives of ordinary African women each day. And, for these women, each day God is with them in their 'wilderness experience,' a situation of near destruction when survival becomes paramount."[81]

The women's shared experiences become an empowering tool that equips them to interrogate the various, taken-for-granted understanding of their marginalised and stigmatised social conditions. The community of non-academic readers functions powerfully as agents of transformative praxis. Social transformative goals constitute the essential point of departure for the hermeneutical practice.

---

[80] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); *idem*., *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), xvi.

[81] Beverley G. Haddad, "Constructing Theologies of Survival in the South African Context: The Necessity of a Critical Engagement Between Postmodern and Liberation Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14 (1998), 11.

Several Circle women have engaged in this hermeneutical practice. These include Kanyoro,[82] Nadar,[83] Haddad,[84] Okure,[85] Plaatjie,[86] Dube,[87] Anderson,[88] Olojede,[89] and many others. These Circle women see "no opposition between being academic and working at the grassroots."[90] Dube concurs and adds, "If all reading is socially conditioned, academic interpretations may be no 'better' than readings of untrained readers."[91] These reading models have opened up a new praxis-oriented hermeneutical space in the context of grassroots women's communities. Okure insists, "The African women's approach is inclusive of scholars and non-scholars, the rich and the poor; it is inclusive of the "scientific," the creative and the popular methods."[92]

---

82 Musimbi Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology,"175.

83 Sarojini Nadar, Gender, Power, Ideology, and Interpretation/s: Womanist and Literary In-terpretations of the Book of Esther (PhD diss., University of Natal, South Africa, 2003), 184;

84 Beverly Haddad, "Constructing Theologies of Survival in the South African Context."

85 Teresa Okure, "Invitation to African Women's Hermeneutical Concerns."

86 Gloria Kehilwe Plaatjie, "Toward a Post-Apartheid Black Feminist Reading of the Bible: A Case of Luke 2:36–38," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa Dube; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001):114-142.

87 Musa W. Dube, "An introduction: How we came to "Read With," *Semeia* 73 (1996):7–17.

88 Cheryl B. Anderson, "Lessons of Healing from Naaman (2 Kings 5; 1–27): An African-American Perspective," in *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities* (ed. I. Phiri, B. Haddad, and M. Masenya; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003), 23-43.

89 Funlola Olojede, "Women and the Cry for Justice in Old Testament Court Narratives: An African Reflection," Old Testament Essays 26 (2013):761-772; "Storytelling as an Indigenous Resource in the Interpretation of Old Testament Ethics and Religion," Scriptura 113 (2014):1-9.

90 Oduyoye & Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise,*15.

91 Dube, Grant me Justice, 50.

92 Okure, "Feminist Interpretations in Africa," in *Searching the Scriptures A Feminist Introduction* (ed. Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1993), 77.

Another related contextual approach that is similarly community and praxis-oriented is reading the Bible in the context of HIV and AIDS. The contemporary situation that elicited this hermeneutical practice is the global HIV/AIDS Pandemic. In other words, the methodological approach emerges out of the context of the devastating global crisis of the HIV-AIDS pandemic. The HIV pandemic caused a shift in research foci and emphasis. The urgency of the HIV/AIDS pandemic compelled the Circle's third Pan-African conference held in Addis Ababa in 2002 to address the epidemic. The theme of the meeting, "Sex, Stigma, and HIV/AIDS: African Women Challenging Religion, Culture, and Social Practices," captured the gender-centric nature of the epidemic.[93] One of the Circle's fundamental goals is to connect theory to praxis. Accordingly, the pandemic compelled Circle women to engage in a more activist scholarship to produce impactful, transformative works that are read beyond academic spaces. Circle women mounted collective emergency responses as efforts to address the pandemic. Dube powerfully reconfigured and recontextualised Matthew 25:42-43 as a scathing indictment of the church's handling of the HIV-AIDS pandemic. She provocatively laments,

> I can hear Jesus saying to us: I was sick with AIDS, and you did not visit me. You did not wash my wounds, nor did you give me medicine to manage my opportunistic infections. I was stigmatised, isolated, and rejected because of HIV/AIDS, and you did not welcome me. I was hungry, thirsty, and naked, completely dispossessed by HIV/AIDS and globalisation in my house and family and you did not give me food, water or any clothing. I was a powerless woman exposed to the high risk of infection and carrying a huge burden of care, and you did not come to my rescue. I was a dispossessed widow and an orphan and you did not meet my needs.[94]

HIV and AIDS biblical hermeneutics is, by necessity, activist in orientation. It offers a lens through which Circle women can investigate how other forms of discrimination that African women face intersect significantly to create a situation of women's vulnerability to

---

93 Nadar and Phiri, eds. "HIV Research, Gender and Religion Studies" In *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa (*Regnum Books, Oxford: Great Britain), 632-639;

94 Dube, "Theological Challenges."

HIV/AIDS. Identity markers such as gender, class, ability, socio-economic status, religion are woven into the fabric of women's distinctive disenfranchisement. As such, women living with HIV experience insurmountable barriers and more significant gender-based inequities.

Many Circle women have done pioneering work on HIV and AIDS biblical hermeneutics and have contributed substantially to emancipatory readings of the Bible in the context of HIV and AIDS. Examples of pioneering works that read the Bible through the prism of the HIV/AIDS hermeneutics are Nadar,[95] Phiri,[96] Dube,[97] Mbuwayesango,[98] Kgalemang[99] Kubai, Mwaura and Ayanga,[100] and Masenya,[101] and that is just to name a few. Many of these Circle

---

95 Nadar, '"Barak God and Die!' Women, HIV and a Theology of Suffering," in *Grant Me justice: HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube and Musimbi R. Kanyoro; Orbis Books: Maryknoll, 2004), 60-79.

96 Phiri, and Nadar, "Talking Back to Religion and HIV & AIDS Using an African Feminist Missiological Framework: Sketching the Contours of the Conversation" (paper read at the Ph.D. Seminar, University of Oslo, 2010).

97 Dube, "Talitha Cum! Calling the Girl-Child and Women to Life in the HIV/AIDS and Globalisation Era," in *African Women, HIV/AIDS, and Faith Communities* (eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad, and Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele; Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2003), 71-93; "Theological Challenges: Proclaiming the Fullness of Life in the HIV/AIDS & Global Economic Era," *International Review of Mission* 91: 2002, 535-549; Dube, & Kanyoro, Grant me justice! HIV/AIDS & gender readings of the Bible (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2004); "HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum; Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS," in *Theological Programmes* (Geneva, 2003).

98 Mbuwayesango, "Women, poverty, and HIV in Zimbabwe: an exploration of inequalities in health care," *African women, religion, and health* (2006):173-186; "Levirate marriage and HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe: the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38)," Journal of constructive theology 13 (2007): 5-15.

99 Malebogo Kgalemang, "Deconstructing the HIV/AIDS Stigma," in *Grant Me justice! HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible* (eds. Dube and Kanyoro; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2004), 141-168.

100 Kubai, Mwaura and Ayanga, eds, Women, Religion, and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008).

101 Masenya, "The Bible, HIV/AIDS and South African women: a bosadi (womanhood) perspective," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 31 (2005): 87-201; idem., Phiri, Isabel, Madipoane Masenya, and Beverley Haddad, eds., *African Women,*

women organised at the grassroots level to provide localised survival strategies and solutions to women's interconnected discriminatory practices. They engaged in resistance readings or readings that disrupt the status quo with a social justice orientation centred on improving the quality lives of persons living with HIV and AIDS. The various socially engaged and transformative scholarship focused on dismantling systemic structures of gender inequality.

D. Postcolonial Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Postcolonial biblical hermeneutics have thrived as an interdisciplinary approach to studying colonial and imperial power structures in recent years.[102] Postcolonial biblical interpretation clusters around questions of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture. African postcolonial feminist interpretation is similar to and is in clear continuity with the feminist cultural or contextual hermeneutical paradigm. Like feminist cultural hermeneutics, postcolonial feminist interpretation prioritises the African socio-cultural context as a hermeneutical starting point. However, postcolonial feminist interpretation warrants a separate discussion because it adds an entirely different dimension to biblical interpretation. Postcolonial feminist scholarship directs attention to colonial histories and imperial power relations, which informed women's representations in the Bible.

HIV/AIDS, and Faith Communities (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003).

[102] Cf. Andrew Mbuvi, "African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline," *Currents in Biblical Research* 15 (2017): 164; Lazare S. Rukundwa, "Postcolonial Theory as a Hermeneutical Tool for Biblical Reading," *HTS* 64 (2008): 339-351; Jeremy Punt, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa: Some Mind and Road Mapping," *Neotestamentica* 37 (2003): 59-85; Why not Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in Southern Africa: Stating the Obvious or Looking for the Impossible?" *Scriptura* 91 (2006): 63-82.

Postcolonial feminist interpretation operates from an anti-colonialist resistance standpoint. It is an appositional paradigm that inter-rogates, problematises, and subverts conventionally established modes of biblical interpretation, especially those with no bearings on readers' lived experiences. The inspiration behind the surge of interest in African postcolonial feminist interpretation in recent years is Musa Dube. Dube is arguably the most renowned and leading postcolonial African feminist scholar whose work is internationally well known, especially among mainstream feminist scholars.[103] Dube's work is paradigmatic of African feminist postcolonial biblical interpretation. She claims that "postcolonial African women, together with their men, are facing a higher enemy flying high above them: the former colonisers who now wear the gowns of neo-colonialism and globalisation."[104] In her landmark, provocative book, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Dube deploys the postcolonial feminist interpretive lens to investigate, challenge and dismantle entrenched ideologies in the biblical text and interpretations that reinforce and perpetuate colonialist, imperialist, or hegemonic structures and practices. Hers is a robust emancipatory framework that is pivotal for decolonising and depatriarchalising texts and interpretations.

In advocating a decolonising reading of the Bible, Dube compellingly shows why the postcolonial approach is vital:

> Postcolonial readings of the Bible must seek to decolonise the biblical text, its interpretations, its readers, its institutions, and seek ways of reading for liberating interdependence. Liberating dependence here entails a two-fold willingness on the part of readers: first, to propound biblical readings that decolonise imperialistic tendencies and other narrative designs; second, to propound readings that seek to highlight the biblical texts and Jesus as undoubtedly important cultures, which are nonetheless, not above all, but among the many important cultures of the world.[105]

---

[103] Mbuwayesango, "Feminist Biblical studies in Africa," 84.

[104] Dube, "Searching for the Lost Needle," 213

[105] Dube, "Talitha Cum Hermeneutics: Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible," in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (eds. Dube, Mbuvi, Mbuwayesango, SBLGPBS 13; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 24.

Dube adeptly reiterates that the purpose of reading for deconstruction is reading to subvert or challenge imperial and patriarchal traditions and ideologies. She maintains, "decolonising feminist biblical practices describes the commitment and the methods of reading the Bible that resist both patriarchal and imperial oppression in order to cultivate a space of liberating interdependence between nations, genders, races, ethnicities, the environment, [etc]."[106]

Dube's proposed method's distinct advantage is that it interweaves postcolonial and African feminist hermeneutical lenses to foster a decolonising, deconstructive reading of the Bible. In direct correlation with Circle goes, Dube's approach takes contemporary readers' social location seriously. She insists that "postcolonial is not a discourse of historical accusations, but a committed search and struggle for decolonisation and liberation of the oppressed."[107] The decolonising stance requires a thoroughgoing interrogation of the power configurations embedded in the biblical texts and the African cultures. Indeed, Dube argues quite emphatically that,

> Reading the Bible and other cultural texts for decolonisation is imperative for those committed to the struggle for liberation. Simultaneously, the Bible is a usable text in imperial projects, how it should be read in the light of its role are central questions to decolonisation and the struggle for liberation. As a Motswana woman of Southern Africa, my reading for decolonisation arises from the historical encounter of Christian texts functioning as the 'talisman' in imperial possession of foreign places and people.[108]

---

[106] Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 111; *idem*., "Searching for the Lost Needle: Double Colonisation & Postcolonial African Feminisms." Studies in World Christianity 5 (1999): 213-228; "Reading for Decolonisation," in *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space, and Power* (eds. Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley; New York, NY: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 51-75; "Jumping the Fire with Judith: Postcolonial Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (eds. S. Schroers, S. Bietenhard; *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement series* 374, Sheffield 2003), 60-76.

[107] Dube, "Toward a Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible," *Semeia* 78 (1997): 14.

[108] Dube, "Reading for Decolonisation," 60.

Dube further contends that imperial values and assumptions are inscribed into the biblical text. Consequently, it is important to acknowledge that the Bible has been used as a tool of oppression by powerful and privileged elites. Therefore, viewed through the postcolonial lens, the Bible's complicated and complicit relationship with imperial history must be recognised. A case in point, missionary work was coupled with the imperial expansion, and they both formed an interdependent relationship. Dube maintains that "by implicating the Bible in the taking of the African black lands, biblical texts are marked as powerful rhetorical instruments of imperialism."[109] Consequently, Dube powerfully insists, "to divorce biblical interpretation from current international relations, or to discuss it primarily as an ancient text, becomes another western ideological stance that hides its direct impact on the postcolonial world and maintains its imperial domination of Two-Thirds World countries."[110] Conversely, the Bible has equally been used as a force for liberation and empowerment by the marginalised and disenfranchised. The Bible becomes thus a site for oppression and a site for resistance. African women have historically used the Bible as a tool for liberation and hope in situations of oppression.

Congruent with the emancipatory focus of her work, Dube decries the continued dominance of the historical-critical interpretive paradigm. She points out that the various iterations of historical-critical methods are defined and shaped by dominant European-American cultural assumptions and ideologies. The method is laden with Eurocentric presuppositions, values, biases, and promotes hegemonic inter-pretations of the Bible that serves the political and ideological interests of Euro-American power holders.

> Dube's postcolonial feminist biblical hermeneutics continues to be a significant work in African biblical studies. Since her ground-breaking book, there has been increased interest in postcolonial hermeneutics.[111]

---

[109] Dube, Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation, 16.

[110] Dube, Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation, 20.

[111] Cf. Mbuwayesango, "How Local Divine Powers Were Suppressed: A Case of Mwari of the Shona," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (eds.

Conclusion and Future Directions of African Women Biblical Studies

I began the paper by noting that the Circle facilitated African women's coming and helped them organise as a powerful force for social change and transformation. For more than 30 years, the Circle has transformed social and religious institutions that perpetuate structural, institutional, and systemic discrimination against women in multiple forms. The paper also underlined that African women's biblical scholarship took roots and spread within varied ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious contexts. The article further noted the explosion of methods and hermeneutical frameworks that have surfaced in AWBS since the creation of the Circle. African women scholars have used these wide varieties of methodologies and perspectives to disrupt, deconstruct, and decolonise dominant Eurocentric interpretations of the Bible.

The paper's fundamental commitment was to provide a framework for mapping the work done by African women biblical studies since the inception of the Circle. It organised the mapping using the main interpretive models currently used in AWBS. It identified three main theoretical frameworks, highlighting the historical locations and goals of each of the frameworks. It observed that the theoretical foundations underpinning the different interpretive strategies used in AWBS are inculturated feminist hermeneutics, feminist cultural hermeneutics, and postcolonial feminist biblical interpretation. It showed that different interpretive strategies could be used within the same theoretical framework. For example, it noted that several scholars used the same general lens of the feminist cultural hermeneutical approach, yet each framework is contextually adapted to address specific contextually shaped and dependent questions. A common thread

---

Dube, Mbuvi, Mbuwayesango; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 63–77; Gomang Seratwa Ntloedibe-Kuswani, "Translating the Divine: The case of Modimo in the Setwana Bible," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (eds. Dube, Mbuvi, Mbuwayesango; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 78–97.

runs through all the diverse approaches. It makes them all hang together—the radical prioritisation of African socio-cultural contexts as a crucial hermeneutical starting point for biblical interpretation.

As the paper has shown, another common thread that unites African women's biblical scholars is their shared gender justice concerns and experiences of patriarchal social norms and customary practices that reproduce gender inequity. Yet, notwithstanding the commonalities, AWBS acknowledges the wealth of diversity of experiences among Circle women. It also observes that African women hold multiple oppressive statuses; the statuses can better be understood and explained through the prism of intersectionality. As such, AWBS cannot foster a single hermeneutical approach to address African women's questions, concerns, and challenges. It takes seriously the diverse daily struggles faced by African women in marginalised communities. Though construed and applied differently by different cultures and communities, the distinct lived realities are grounded in androcentric, patriarchal assumptions and ideologies. Therefore, African women chose methodologies that best suit their social location and interpretive goals. Additionally, all the works show a strong commitment to liberation and social transformation.

What further binds approaches together is their appeal to the *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics of liberation and life as a compelling call to action and guiding principle. *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics of liberation equally calls for solidarity and collective action among African women. This *Talitha Cum* consciousness facilitated a sense of solidarity among women in the academy and grassroots women and communities.

Finally, in terms of research and publications, the paper noted that, for African women biblical scholars, the past three decades have been prolific even though much remains to be done. African women scholars have also been productive contributors to the success of the SBL. Despite this, the poignant question that Nadar asked during the SBL

2006 session remains a lingering question: "Who, within global scholarship read(s) Circle works?"[112] Nadar notes that "Musimbi Kanyoro's feminist cultural hermeneutics, or Musa Dube's postcolonial feminist hermeneutics [. . .] still remains on the margins, and is scarcely even quoted within male liberation discourses let alone used as sources for their reflections."[113] To date, this remains an important unanswered question. However, Masenya attempts to address Nadar's concerns when she states, "choosing not to mimic mainstream gender-sensitive frameworks but to develop own home–grown, home-friendly frameworks, ones which would first give priority to the needs of local women, will naturally come with a price, a price so high that one might struggle to gain upward academic mobility."[114]

While the question Nadar poses may remain a perennial problem, nevertheless, AWBS has become and will remain a force to contend with in the guild of biblical scholarship. Although there is still a paucity of African women biblical scholars, an international or global African women's scholarly presence has finally crystallised. African women have contributed in increasing numbers to critical biblical scholarship. They have done ground-breaking innovative research that has become increasingly vital in global biblical scholarship. Additionally, African women biblical scholars have improved their impact and are no longer marginalised by the broader international academic community. African women's scholarly works are regularly presented at annual regional and annual academic conferences. They have also published scores of articles in highly respected, internationally reputed peer-reviewed journals. African women equally occupy high positions in the society of Biblical Literature. Undeniably, therefore, AWBS publications have a broad and growing influence in the global academic circles.

---

112 Masenya, "For Ever Trapped?" 193.

113 Nadar, "Changing the World: The Task of Feminist Biblical Scholars," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25 (Fall 2009), 140.

114 Masenya, "For Ever Trapped? An African Voice on Insider/Outsider Dynamics within South African Old Testament Gender-Sensitive Frameworks," *OTE* 27 (2014): 201.

As we advance, to enable the field's growth, AWBS must build on, sustain, and foster the momentum it has generated. AWBS have to continue to foster transnational professional networks and communities with their global counterparts. To preserve its vitality, AWBS should be willing to engage in collaborative dialogue and research partnerships with others in the guild of biblical scholarship. AWBS' commitment to working in collaboration with colleagues across the biblical studies guild—not just colleagues from other minoritised groups—could help raise critical awareness of the deeply entrenched gender and racial inequities that persist in the guild. It could also become an avenue for greater dissemination of AWBS' publications to a broader readership. African women biblical scholars have made significant strides in the last three decades to work collaboratively on writing projects to promote collective growth in research and publications. Just as important, moving forward, African women scholars need to be intentional about supporting each other's work. This support can be accomplished by reading and disseminating each other scholarship, scholarship of well-established scholars, and the burgeoning scholarship of emergent scholars.

References

Afolabi, Bosede. "Why Too Many Mothers Are Still Dying at Childbirth in West Africa." In *The Conversation* (July, 7, 2015), available online at: *http://theconversation.com/why-too*-many-mothers-are-still-dying-at-childbirth-in-west-africa-42574 (accessed May 15, 2020).

Ahikire, Josephine. "African Feminism in Context: Reflections on the Legitimation Battles, Victories, and Reversals." *Feminist Africa* 19 (2014): 7-23.

Akoto-Abutiate, Dorothy Bea. *Proverbs, and the African Tree of Life: Grafting Biblical Proverbs onto Ghanaian Eve Folk Proverbs*. Leiden: Brill 2014.

Blount, Brian K. *Cultural Interpretation*: Reorienting New Testament Criticism. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. *"Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics."* University of Chicago Legal Forum 1 (1989): 139-167.

_____. *"Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color."* Stanford Law Review 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

Dube, Musa. *"Readings of Semoya: Batswana Women's Interpretations of Matt. 15:21-28."* Semeia 73 (1996): 111-129.

_____. *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. Massachusetts: Chalice, 2000.

_____. "Reading for Decolonisation." In *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space, and Power*. New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002a.

_____. "Rereading the Bible: Biblical Hermeneutics and Social Justice." *African Theology Today* 1 (2002b).

_____. "Theological Challenges: Proclaiming the Fullness of Life in the HIV/AIDS & Global Economic Era." *International Review of Mission* 91(2002): 535-550.

_____. "Social Location as a Story-telling Method of Teaching in HIV/AIDS Contexts." In *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programs*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003.

_____. "Talitha Cum! Calling the Girl-Child and Women to Life in the HIV/AIDS & Globalisation Era." Pages 71-93 in *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*. Edited by I. A. Phiri, B. Haddad and M. Masenya. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003.

_____. "Looking Back and Forward: Postcolonialism, Globalisation, God and Gender." *Scriptura* 92 (2006): 178-193.

_____. *The HIV & AIDS Bible. Selected Essays*. Scranton and London: University of Scranton Press 2008.

_____. "Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible." Pages 89-102 in *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology*. Edited by Kwok Pui-lan. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010.

Dube, Musa, and Musimbi Kanyoro, eds. *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004.

Exum, J.C. and S.D. Moore, *Biblical Studies, Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*. JSOT Sup 266; Gender, Culture, Theory 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.

Fabella, Virginia, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds. *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994.

Haddad, Beverley G. The Role of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa in the Social Transformation of the Western Cape 1960-1990. Belleville: University of the Western Cape, 1993.

_____. "Constructing Theologies of Survival in the South African Context: The Necessity of a Critical Engagement Between Postmodern and Liberation Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14 (1998): 5-18.

_____. "African Women's Theologies of Survival: Intersecting Faith, Feminisms, and Development." PhD, School of Theology, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2000.

_____. "Practices of Solidarity, Degrees of Separation: Doing Theology as Women in South Africa." *Journal of Constructive Theology* 6 (2000): 39-53.

Hinga, Teresia M. "African Feminist Theologies, the Global Village, and the Imperative of Solidarity across Borders: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18, no. 1 (2002): 79-86.

_____. "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa." Pages 183-194 in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*. Edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992.

Hinga, T. M., Kubai, A. N., Mwaura, P., and Ayanga, H. eds. *Women, Religion and HIV/AIDS. In Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008.

Hooks, bell. Black Looks: Race and Representation. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

_____. "Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness." Pages 153-159 in *The feminist Standpoint theory reader: Political and intellectual controversies*. Edited by Sandra Harding. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Horsley, Richard. *Paul, and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000.

Kanyoro, Musimbi. "Inculturation and the Mission of the Church." In *Inculturation and the Mission of the Church in Nigeria: The Third CIWA Theology Week 4th–8th May 1992*. Edited by J. Brookman-Amissah and J.E. Anyanwu et al. Port Harcourt: CIWA Publications, 1992.

_____. "Feminist Theology and African Culture." In *Violence against Women*. Edited by M. Getui and G. Wamue. Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996.

_____. "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contri-bution to Theology in the 21st Century." In *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001.

_____. Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective. New York: Pilgrim Press, 2002.

_____. "Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle." In *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*. New York: Orbis Books, 2006.

Kolawole, Mary Ebun Modupe. *Womanism and African Consciousness*. Trento: Africa World Press, 1997.

Ilesanmi, Simeon O. "Inculturation and Liberation: Christian Social Ethics and the African Theology Project." *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*. 15 (1995): 49-73.

Lewis, Shelby F. "Africana Feminism: An Alternative Paradigm for Black Women in the Academy." Pages 41-52 in *Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils*. Edited by Lois Benjamin. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997.

Lorde, Audre. Sister Outsider Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984.

_____. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Pages 111-114 in Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984.

Magesa, Laurenti. "The Challenge of African Woman Defined Theology for the 21st Century." Pages 88-101 in *Challenges and Prospects of the Church in Africa. Theological Reflections of the 21st Centur*y. Edited by N. W. Ndung' u and P. N. Mwaura. Nairobi: Paulines 2005.

_____. "Recognising the Reality of African Religion in Tanzania." Pages 76-83 in *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention*. Edited by J. F. Keenan. New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005.

_____. Anatomy of Inculturation. Transforming the Church in Africa, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 2004.

Maluleke, Tinyiko S. "African 'Ruths,' Ruthless Africas: Reflections of an African Mordecai." Pages 237–251 in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Edited by Musa W. Dube. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001.

_____. "The Challenge of HIV/AIDS for Theological Education in Africa. Towards an HIV/AIDS Sensitive Curriculum." *Missionalia. Journal of the Southern African Missiological Society* 29 (2001):125-143.

_____. "The "Smoke Screens" Called Black and African Liberation Theologies - The Challenge of African Women Theology." *Journal of Constructive Theology* 3 (1997): 39-63.

Maponda, A.M., 2016, 'The impact of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians: French zone on church and African theology issues', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37 a1597. *https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i2.1597* (accessed May 15, 2020).

Maseno, Loreen. "Gendering Inculturation in Africa: A Discussion of Three African Women Theologians' Entry into the Inculturation Scene." *Norwegian Journal for Missions* 4 (2004): 225-236.

Masenya, Madipoane. "Killed by Aids and Buried by Religion: African Female Bodies in Crisis." In *Let My People Stay! Researching the Old Testament in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton, 2006.

_____. How Worthy is the Woman of Worth? Proverbs 31:10-13 in an African–*South African Context*. Peter Lang: New York, 2004.

_____. "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences: Revisiting the Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach." *Old Testament Essays* 18/3 (2005): 741-751.

_____. "Trapped between Two 'Canons': African-South African Christian Women in the HIV/AIDS Era." Pages 113-127 in *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*. Edited by I. A. Phiri, B. Haddad and M. Masenya. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003.

Mbuwayesango, Dora Rudo "Feminist Biblical studies in Africa." Pages 71-85 in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*. Edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014.

Mbuvi, A.M. "African Biblical studies: An introduction to an emerging discipline." *Currents in Biblical Research* 15 (2017): 149–178.

Monohan, B.M. *Writing, sharing, doing: The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*, Electronic thesis, Boston College, University of Boston, 2004.

Mosala, I.J. "The implication of the text of Esther for African Women's struggle for liberation in South Africa." *Semeia* 59 (1992): 129–137.

Moyo Fulata L. "Sex, Gender, Power and HIV/AIDS in Malawi: Threats and Challenges to Women being Church." Pages 127-145 in *On being Church: African Women's Voices and Visions*. Edited by I. A. Phiri and S. Nadar. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005.

_____. "The Red Beads and White Bead: Malawian Women's Sexual Empowerment in the HIV& Aids Era." *Journal of Constructive Theology* 11 (2005): 53-66.

_____. "Sex, Gender, Power and HIV/AIDS in Malawi: Threats and Challenges to Women being Church." Pages 127-145 in *On being Church: African Women's Voices and Visions*. Edited by I. A. Phiri and S. Nadar. Geneva: WCC Publications 2005.

Mutambara, Maaraidzo. "African Women Theologies Critique Inculturation." Pages 173-192 in *Inculturation and Postcolonial Discourse in African Theology*. New York: Peter Lang 2006.

Mwaura, Philomena Njeri. "Gender Equity and Empowerment in African Public Theology: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians." Lecture was given at the Annual Hendrik Kraemer Lectures, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2015.

_____. "Stigmatisation and Discrimination of HIV/AIDS Women in Kenya: A Violation of Human Rights and its Theological Implications." *Exchange. Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Researc*h 37 (2008): 35-51.

Nadar, Sarojini. "'Barak God and Die!': Women, HIV, and a Theology of Suffering." In *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006.

_____. "A South African Indian Womanist Reading of the Character of Ruth." Pages 159–175 in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Edited by Musa W. Dube. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature / Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001.

_____. "'Texts of Terror': The Conspiracy of Rape in the Bible, Church and Society: The Case of Esther 2:1–18." Pages 77–95 in *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*. Edited by Isabel A. Phiri and Sarojini Nadar. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2006.

_____. "Toward a Feminist Missiological Agenda: A Case Study of the Jacob Zuma Rape Trial." *Missionalia* 37 (2009): 85–102.

Nzimande, Makhosazana K. "The Gebirah in the Hebrew Bible in the Light of Queen Jezebel and the Queen Mother of Lemuel." Ph.D. diss., Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, 2005.

Njoroge, Nyambura. "The Missing Voice: African Women Theology." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 77-83.

_____. "Talitha Cum! To the New Millennium: A Conclusion." In *Talitha Cum: Theologies of African Women*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001.

_____. "A New Way of Facilitating Leadership: Lessons from African Women Theologians." In *African Christianity: An African Story*. Department of Church History, University of Pretoria, 2005.

Nzimande, Makhosazana K. Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Gebirah in the Hebrew Bible in the Light of Queen

Jezebel and the Queen Mother of Lemuel. PhD, Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, 2005.

Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. Who Will Roll the Stone Away? The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women. Genève: WCC Publications, 1990.

_____. "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective." In *Paths of African Theology*. London: SCM Press, 1994.

_____. "The Story of a Circle," *The Ecumenical Review* 53 (2001), 97-100.

_____. Introducing African Women's Theology: Introductions in Feminist Theology. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.

_____. "Acting as Women." In *African Theology Today*. Edited by Emmanuel Katongole. Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2002, 171-188.

_____. "African Culture and the Gospel. Inculturation from an African Woman's Perspective." Pages 39-61 in *One Gospel - Many Cultures: Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology*. Edited by M. A. Oduyoye and H. M. Vroom. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003.

_____. Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.

_____. "Gender and Theology in Africa Today" in *Journal of Constructive Theology*." 8 (2002): 35-46.

Okure, Teresa. "Invitation to African Women's Hermeneutical Concerns." *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 19 (2003): 71–95.

_____. "Women in the Bible." Pages 47-59 in *With Passion and Compassion. Third World Women Doing Theology*. Edited by M. A. Oduyoye and V. Fabella. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988.

Olojede, Funlola. "Unsung heroines of the Hebrew Bible: A contextual theological reading from the perspective of Woman Wisdom." Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, 2011.

_____. "Being wise and being female in Old Testament and Africa: Old Testament wisdom, human dignity and the poor." Scriptura 111 (2012): 472-479.

_____. Olojede and Masenya, "Sex and Power(lessness) in Selected Northern Sotho and Yorùbá Proverbs: An Intertextual Reading of Proverbs 5-7." Pages 217-130 in *Reading Proverbs intertextually*. New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019.

Phiri, Isabel Apawo. "Doing Theology in Community, The case of African Women Theologians in the 1990s." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997).

_____. "Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity." *Religion & Spirituality* 61 (2004), 16-24.

_____. "HIV/AIDS: An African Theological Response in Mission." *The Ecumenical Review* 56 (2004): 422-431.

Phiri, Isabel Apawo, and Sarojini Nadar. "Treading Softly but Firmly: African Women, Religion, and Health." In *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*. New York: Orbis Books, 2006.

_____. "Life-Affirming African Theological Reflection on HIV and AIDS." *Concilium* 3 (2007): 41-47.

_____. "Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education (1989-2008)." *International Review of Mission* 98 (2009): 105-119.

_____. "African Women Theologies." In *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*. London: SPCK, 2010.

_____. "Talking Back to Religion and HIV & AIDS Using an African Feminist Missiological Framework: Sketching the Contours of the Conversation." Paper read at the Ph.D Seminar, University of Oslo, 2010.

_____. "'The Personal Is Political': Faith and Religion in a Public University." *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 14 (2011): 81-94.

Phiri, Isabel, Beverley G. Haddad, and Madipoane Masenya, eds. *African Women, HIV/AIDS, and Faith Communities*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003.

Plaatjie, Gloria K. "Toward a Post–Apartheid Black Feminist Reading of the Bible: A Case of Luke 2:36–38." Pages 114–142 in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Edited by Musa W. Dube. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001.

Pui-Lan, Kwok. "Mercy Amba Oduyoye and African Women's Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20 (2004): 7–22.

_____. Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005.

Punt, Jeremy. "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa: Some Mind and Road Mapping," *Neotestamentica* 37 (2003): 59-85.

_____. Why not Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in Southern Africa: Stating the Obvious or Looking for the Impossible?" *Scriptura* 91 (2006): 63-82.

Robbins, Vernon. "The Rhetorical Full-Turn in Biblical Interpretation: Reconfiguring Rhetorical-Political Analysis." Pages 48-60 in *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible*. Edited by Stanley Porter. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002.

Rukundwa, Lazare S. "Postcolonial Theory as a Hermeneutical Tool for Biblical Reading," *HTS* 64 (2008): 339-351.

Sergovia, Fernando. Decolonising Biblical Studies: A View from the Margin. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000.

_____. Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections. London: T&T Clark, 2006.

Segovia, Fernando F. and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds. *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*. New York: T&T Clark, 2007.

Sugirtharajah, R. S. Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World. New York, Maryknoll, 2006.

Yafeh-Deigh, Alice. Paul's Sexual and Marital Ethics in 1 Corinthians 7: An African-Cameroonian Perspective (Bible and Theology in Africa). New York: Peter Lang, 2015.

III. Genesis 1: An Earth-Friendly Reading*

Musa W. Dube

A Dramatic Abstract

In the quest for an eco-justice reading, this article invites readers/listeners to theater, where the drama of creation is staged. God enters the stage where the Earth is formless, dark and void, but covered by the Spirit of God. God begins to call various members of the Earth community into being through God's own word over six days. They each come marching onto the stage. God views each created member and pronounces them good, and finally pronounces all members to be very good. God gives the sun and the moon the power to rule the Earth. During the creation drama, God invites the Earth to the stage to give forth vegetation, water creatures and animals. The Earth, thus, does not only host all members of the Earth community, but also becomes the co-creator with God, who ensures continuity of creation. On the sixth day, the Earth is no longer dark, void or formless, for there is the light, atmosphere, sun, moon, stars, dry ground, seas, vegetation and living creatures of all sorts on the stage. God Looks at them and says, "Let us make an earthling in our image, in our likeness." And thus a human being comes into being as a child of the Earth and was told to keep the Earth Community just as good as God created it. Nonetheless, today's reader/listener cannot watch the biblical drama of creation with innocence, given the fact that Earth is facing environmental crisis from human exploitation. The article thus seeks to give an Earth-centered reading that does not entertain anthropocentric perspectives.

Introduction: Sitting in the Theater of Creation

I would like to invite you to the most spectacular theater, this evening (even better than Broadway)! Sit back and relax as the curtain opens,

---

* First published in *Black Theology: An International Journal* 13/3, 2015:230-246. Now republished with permission. See: https://www.tandfonline.com

for you are about to be ferried back in time—to the beginning of time! You are invited to theater to watch the creation of the Universe, as presented to us by Genesis 1.

Genesis 1 gives us one of the most elegantly crafted dramatic narratives.[1] The narrative invites the reader/hearer into the theatre of creation to become a witness of the creation of the Universe. The drama of creation is played out on the stage, featuring one actor: God, whose word brings forth all members of the creation.[2] If there is any action that is carried out by the rest of the members of creation is that they hear the word of God, who calls them into being, or invites them to participate, and they comply. The splendor of creation is presented in the very process of its creation, with rhythmic narration of "God said and it was"; God looked and "God saw that it was good" repeated – repetitions that set the tone and mood of the passage, thereby underlining what is important for the audience in the theater of creation. In this theater of creation, the curtain opens and closes six times, with each scene marked by a separate day.

---

1 See W. G. Plaut, "Genesis, Book of." In John Hayes ed. *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) 436-442 (436), who briefly discusses how the book of Genesis inspired poetry, drama and novels in its history of interpretation. The creation stories of Genesis are commonly categorised as myths, which refers to a story that does not profess or seek to express historical facts, but to communicate a particular truth. Even through it is myth, its dramatic characteristics are also recognised. For example, S. H. Hooke, "Genesis." In Matthew Black ed. *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (London: Routledge, 1962), 175-207 (178) points out that in Nehemiah 9 Priestly Prayer, "the story of creation has its place in the rehearsal of God's ways with Israel," he continues to say... "the Priestly account with its recurring refrains may have been a chant sung or recited at the New Year festival where the victory of Yahweh over the forces of evil and disorder were celebrated."

2 It is only in the creation of human beings, that God makes a consultative invitation to others present for the creation of human beings, captured in verse 26, which reads. "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." According to Terrence E. Fretheim, "Genesis." In *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 321-49 (345) "The Let us Language" refers to an image of God as a consultant of other divine beings...God is not in heaven alone, but is engaged in a relationship of mutuality within the divine realm."

> God creates the Earth[3], heavens[4], vegetation and all living things in a six-day process and on the seventh day God rests. Each day serves as a dramatic scene that has its closure with anticipation of "to be continued" until the whole play comes to its completion on the sixth day. Throughout the process of creation, the narrative repeatedly tells us that the Creator God would stop and evaluate what was created. Seven times, the narrative tells us that God found every aspect of creation good (1-4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).[5] Indeed, the last pronunciation underlines that God found creation not just good, but *very good* (v. 31). There could not have been a better opening of the biblical scriptures. Niditch points out with this opening, "the creation of people of Israel is set within the context of the wider creation of the Universe itself."[6]

While Genesis 1:1-31 presents us with the beauty of creation, Norman Habel and many scientists point out that

> Earth is facing an environmental crisis. This crisis threatens the very life of the planet. The atmosphere we breathe is being polluted. The forests that generate the oxygen we need to survive are being depleted at a rapid rate. Fertile soils needed to provide food are being poisoned by salinity

---

3 Save where I am citing, the word Earth, referring to Planet Earth, will be capitalised throughout the essay. This is in accordance with the Earth Bible Team in Norman Habel, ed. *Reading from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 25-7 (29) that underlines that we need to listen to "the Earth as a subject in the text—rather than as a topic in the text, or as the backdrop to human history." Indeed, this article is highly indebted to the Earth Bible Team for the technical language that it provides for thinking and reading the biblical text for ecojustice. Technical terms that are used in this essay such as Earth Community, anthropocentricism and other perspectives are drawn from the Earth Bible project. The Earth Bible itself is highly dependent on the feminist paradigms of reading (see pp. 32-37). Feminism has long recognised the oppression of women and the Earth as inter-linked. See Carol Adams, ed. *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

4 See "Genesis." In Pat Alexander, ed. *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Oxford: A Lion Book," 1978), 129-154 (146) "the Hebrews used the word [heaven] to refer to the sky. The phrase 'the heaven and earth' means the same as our word 'universe.' Heaven can also refer to where God is."

5 Toni Craven, "Creation Story." In Letty M. Russell and Shannon J. Clarkson, eds. *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1996), 61.

6 Susan Niditch, "Genesis." In Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *The Women's Bible Commentary*. (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1992), 10-24 (10).

> and pesticides. Waters that house organisms essential to the cycle of life are being polluted by chemical waste. Global warming has become a frightening threat.... This crisis is so pervasive, destructive and insidious that academics, biblical scholars, theologians and religious practitioners can no longer ignore it.[7]

In her book, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*, Sally McFague underlines this crisis, holding that:

> Climate change, quite simply, is the issue of the twenty-first century. It is not one issue among many... it is warning us that the way we are living on our planet is causing us to head for disaster. We must change. All of the other issues we care about— social justice, peace, prosperity, freedom—cannot occur unless our planet is healthy. It is the unifying issue of our time: it is our "World WAR III" as it were: the concern that must develop into a worldwide movement *for change of mind and change of action*.[8]

Given the severe environmental crisis confronting us, the contemporary reader/hearer stands between two conflicting stories: the biblical story describing the splendor of God's creation in its perfection and today's sorry state of the Earth. Entering the theater of creation, as presented by Genesis 1, is no longer a luxury, but a call to re-think our relationship with the Earth. The reader/audience of Genesis 1, who is a privileged witness of the drama of creation, has an important role in keeping the God standard for the Earth and all its members.

This article's re-reading of Genesis 1 from the Earth perspective is, therefore, an invitation to re-enter the theater of creation as an audience who is called upon to empathise with the Creator God and the standards God posits for all the members of the Earth community, in seeking faith perspectives that promote eco-justice. As used in this article, the term Earth community is drawn from the volume *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth*. According to Norman Habel, the editor of the volume, "Earth is a community of interconnected living

---

7 Norman Habel, ed. Reading from the Perspective of the Earth, 10.

8 Mcfague, S. A New Climate for Theology: God the World, and Global Warming (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008) 15.

things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.... humans are Earth-bound."[9] As Habel underlines, to read from the perspective of the Earth community is the call to re-value the interconnectedness of all members. It shall be clearer below that embracing a perspective of interconnectedness and liberating interdependence than a posture of "power-over"[10] other members of the Earth is necessitated by a sad human history of apportioning themselves the right to exploit and dominate the Earth and other members for themselves. This posture is defined as a framework of viewing the Earth from dualistic, hierarchical and anthropocentric perspectives, which regard the Earth and all other non-human members of the Earth as below human beings and available for their endless and exploitative use.[11] Anthropocentricism is, therefore, a human-centered framework that views the Earth from a perspective of human interests, and often disregards that human beings are not apart nor above other members of the Earth Community, neither can they survive without the latter. Before we can investigate anthropocentricism and how Genesis might be presenting a different view, it is important to briefly revisit the contemporary state of the Earth—the context on reading the Bible for ecojustice.

Contemporary Context: Creation Has Been Groaning

For the past two decades, the Earth has been eloquently protesting against human oppression and exploitation.[12] We have all witnessed significant climatic changes and deadly natural disasters. In some places, it is growing frequency of droughts and floods while some

---

9 Norman Habel, ed. Reading from the Perspective of the Earth, 27.

10 Denise Ackerman, "Power." In Letty M. Russell and Shannon J. Clarkson, eds. *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1996), 219-220 (220).

11 Norman Habel, ed. Reading from the Perspective of the Earth, 25-37.

12 On giving or hearing the voice of the Earth, See Norman Habel, ed. *Reading from the Perspective*, 25.

places are characterised by deforestation and desertification; in others, it is rising waves of the sea beyond their normal boundaries, in yet more places it is unusual snow storms, the melting of the glaciers in the Antarctica, which are crucial for maintaining the temperatures of the Earth. Even with my meager decades of living on ancient Earth, I can testify that the land and the climate used to be more predictable and friendly when I was younger than of late. In my country, Botswana, with its fragile semi-desert environment, the current changes have tipped the scale to its extreme end, leaving many subsistence farmers unable to produce crops for their own daily survival. Indeed, research is increasingly showing that while global warming is undoubtedly an unfolding tragedy for all of us, the poor members of our communities will become even poorer.[13]

The scientific community of scholars call current experiences global warming and warn us that human beings are unfortunately active participants in the destruction of the Earth. George Kinoti holds that, "three factors in particular are harming God's creation: rapid population growth...increase in the consumption of resources, and use of polluting technologies," which lead to overuse of land, loss of forests, water pollution, loss of species, loss of fish, climate change, loss of the Earth's shield, and pollution by chemicals.[14] W. Kistner points out that:

> At a rapid rate the ecology is impoverished...in the world at large. Irreplaceable resources are wasted. The denial by humans of their koinonia with land, water, air, animals and plants in the struggle to survive inflicts wounds on the life supporting resources and on fellowship with other species and plants on which human survival depends.[15]

Mcfague, who opens her above mentioned book by describing climate change, through highlighting the evidence and consequences, moves

---

13 Sally Mcfague, A New Climate for Theology, 22.

14 George Kinoti, "Christians and the Environment." In Tokunoh Adeyemo ed. *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006) 616.

15 W. Kistner, "Koinonia: The Church Creating Community." In M. Guma. & L. A. Milton, eds. *An African Challenge to the Church in the 21st Century* (Cape Town: Salty Print, 1997) 133-146 (144).

on to show how global warming is a theological problem. She holds that:

> The environmental crisis is a theological problem, a problem coming from the views of God and ourselves that encourages or permits our destructive, unjust actions. For example, if I see myself as superior to other animals and life forms—a privileged individual... then of course I will act in ways that support my continuation in this position. So we are suggesting that who God is and who we are must be central questions if we hope to change our actions in the direction of just, sustainable planetary living.[16]

From the above authors' description, at the core of the destruction of the earth is failure of human beings to regard themselves as interconnected with other members of the Earth community. human beings regard themselves as superior to the rest of the Earth community and feel entitled to endless exploitation of the Earth resources. This posture is from dualistic and hierarchical anthropocentric perspectives. As McFague underlines, such a framework seems to be nurtured by religious perspectives and beliefs. It follows that for Genesis 1 to serve as a story of liberating interdependence for all members of the Earth Community, all forms of anthropocentricism will need to be identified and re-interpreted from a perspective of ecojustice. In this article, I propose to re-read Genesis 1 for ecological justice by:

- Employing some aspects of drama to appreciate the message of Genesis 1 further.
- Suggesting that emphasis on the sacredness and goodness of all creation undermines any anthropocentric perspectives found in the chapter.
- Identifying and re-interpreting ideological perspectives that devalue the Earth, by re-reading Genesis 1:1-2 in the light of the Lord's Prayer and Rev 21: 2-3.
- Identifying anthropocentric perspectives and making attempts to re-read for ecological justice. Here I will focus on Genesis 1: 26-29b and attempt to re-read it in the light of Genesis 1:1-25.

---

[16] Mcfague, S. A New Climate for Theology, 33.

- Proposing that the redeeming power of Genesis 1 lies in the first twenty-five verses (1-25) that underline the goodness and sacredness of all members of creation, over the four verses (vv.26-29b) that discuss the creation of human beings.

Genesis 1:1-2 "In the Beginning, God...!"

The reader/listener who sits in the theater of creation hears the first line of the play: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, while the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters," Genesis 1:1-2. [17] The formlessness, emptiness and darkness of the Earth constitute the conflict that must be confronted by the main actor, God. The opening verses thus invite anticipation from the audience, who are eager to see how God would fashion Earth from its formlessness, emptiness and darkness. Yet the verses assert from the start that the whole universe is a product of God's creation—both heaven and Earth. Even if the Earth is on stage for further creation, from its formlessness, emptiness and darkness, it is clear that the presence of God is in it, since it is stated that "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." The latter underlines that before creation of other members of the Earth community, the Earth was the abode of God's Spirit. Verses 2-25 are elaborate in featuring God the creator on the stage, transforming darkness to co-exist with light, vv.3-5; and transforming emptiness into platitude and formlessness into structure.[18] Commenting on these opening verses, Barnabe Assohoto and

---

[17] This is a NIV translation. The NRSV reads: "In the beginning when God created the heaven and earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the wind from God swept over the face of the waters."

[18] Terrence E. Fretheim, "Genesis." In *The New Interpreters Bible* (Vol. 1), 343, holds that "The formless void...is neither "nothing" nor an undifferentiated mass. The earth, the waters (deep), the darkness, and the wind are discrete realities." Rather, it is void/empty "in the sense of something desolate and unproductive." Hooke, "Genesis" 179, reading is that "the original state of the earth is a watery chaos."

Samuel Ngewa hold that, "The first verse of Genesis can be read as a summary statement that God created everything—the heavens and the earth and everything in them (1:1). The rest of the chapter is then seen as an expansion on this summary."[19]

Nonetheless, we have to ask if the first two verses construct worldviews that propound an ideology that is oppressive to the Earth. Norman Habel holds that the verse hardly escapes the long dualistic and hierarchical constructions of Earth and heaven. In these constructions, the Earth is always compared to heaven unfavorably: heaven is a holy abode of God where all suffering has been eliminated, whereas Earth is its opposite[20] (2000:43-44). Christian Songs and writings are elaborate that extol heaven over Earth: "This world is not my home, I'm just passing by" types of songs. The Christian Church and believers have over the centuries constructed a pilgrimage theology: they are on Earth temporarily, enroute to their final destination, heaven. In this theological thinking, the Earth is often devalued and characterised as evil and as something that will pass away. The perspective has not assisted biblically-based cultures to appreciate and value the Earth, since this theology says that we are pilgrims on our way out of this evil Earth. Verse two seemingly writes into this perspective as it speaks of the voidness, darkness and the emptiness of the Earth, which God attends to, but then, nothing is said about heaven. As Habel points out, the silence feeds the dualistic hierarchical theology by suggesting that heaven has always been perfect – the abode of God while the Earth is God's footstool (Isaiah 66:2). The presence of God on Earth is often removed. God lives in sacred heaven, not on evil Earth.

Be that as it may, there are some biblical perspectives that allow the reader-hearer believer to have different views of heaven and Earth. Re-reading Genesis 1:1 in the light of the Lord's Prayer and Revelation 21-22 would be such an example. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "May your will be done on Earth as it is in

---

19 Barnabe, Assohoto and Samuel Ngewa, "Genesis." In Tokunboh Adeyemo ed. *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), 9-84 (10).

20 Norman Habel, ed. Reading from the Perspective of the Earth, 43-45.

heaven," Matthew 6:10. The petition seems to close the gap between heaven and Earth, thereby challenging us to re-think the dualism and hierarchy that have traditionally accompanied the two places. If the hymnal theology has always elevated heaven above Earth; if it has always painted heaven with the most beautiful colors of prosperity, justice, peace between long standing enemies, such as lions and people; if heaven is a place of no pain, in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to embrace the commitment of working for the same standard to be realised on Earth. Within the framework of the Lord's Prayer, Earth is as deserving and as valued as heaven.

Moreover, as some scholars have argued, making this petition does not render the praying partner a passive recipient. Rather, it invites the supplicant as an active participant in the actualisation of God's will on Earth as it is in heaven[21] (Luz, 1992:380). Christian and biblical-based cultures that have a highly cultivated theology of heaven are obliged to apply it here on Earth than to use it to neglect and devalue Earth. According to Ulrich Luz, "The constant use of the Lord's Prayer has led to the fact that there is hardly a Christian text which has had greater effect in piety, instruction and dogmatics."[22] Given its widespread use, the paradigm shift provided by the Lord's Prayer makes it a framework that is more likely to be effective in inviting biblically-based cultures to celebrate the value of the Earth with equal value that is given to heaven.

Barbara Rossing's reading of Revelation 21:2-3 gives another possible theological shift that values Earth on equal footing with heaven. She highlights that Revelation ends with a reverse rapture, that is, God and new Earth come from heaven to dwell on Earth.[23] The verse reads, "And I saw the Holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God....and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as

---

21 Luz, Ulrich. *Matthew 1-7: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 380.

22 Luz, Ulrich. *Matthew 1-7,* 372.

23 Rossing, Barbara R. "For the Healing of the World: Reading Revelation Ecologically." In David Rhoads, ed. *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 165-184.

their God: they will be God's people and God very self will be with them." Rossing underlines that it is notable that after this verse "Heaven is not mentioned again in the book of Revelation."[24] In my view, placing Genesis 1:1-2 within the framework of the Lord's Prayer and Rev 21: 2-3 brings us to a new interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2. God who dwells on Earth is consistent with Genesis 1:2, which states that from the very beginning "the Spirit of God was hovering above the waters of the Earth." This framing, that is, the opening of the biblical scriptures and their closure, which highlights the presence of God on Earth needs more emphasis in the quest for eco-justice.

In sum, both the Lord's Prayer and Rev. 21:2-3 serve well in offering a counter-tradition that resists the Earth-oppressive dualistic and hierarchical perspectives. It is worth noting that all the "dualisms" found in this passage do not denote hierarchical opposition, which denote the superiority of one over the other. These include: heaven and Earth, light and darkness, day and night, dryland and water bodies, sea animals and land creatures, and women and men, among others. They are rather God celebration of diversity as well as forms of giving form to the Earth. Although later biblical tradition has read these dualisms as hierarchical oppositions that sanction the oppression one by another, the creation story does not carry such an ideology.

Genesis 1: 1-25: "God saw all that God had made, and it was very good!"

The stage has been set, with a formless, empty and dark Earth, awaiting the one and only actor, God, to begin the process of creating the Earth. Hush! God comes onto the stage. All the stage lights are off and God exclaims: "What a wet, dark, and formless place!" God starts off by saying, "Let there be light in this place!" And there was light.

---

[24] Rossing, Barbara R. "For the Healing of the World," 121.

As verses 3-30 attest, the audience is not disappointed. God the creator begins work from day one until day six, creating various members of the Earth community and putting order into its formlessness, which can be graphically presented as follows:

Time Setting	God Creates	God Confirms & Evaluates	God Gives
Day 1	Light (day and night)	"God saw that the light was good," v. 4	-
Day 2	Sky (Atmosphere)	-	-
Day 3	Sea and dry ground	"God saw that it was good," v.10	-
	Vegetation	"God saw that it was good," v. 12	-
Day 4	Sun, moon, stars (seasons, days, years)	"God saw that it was good," v. 18	**Role:** to rule over day and night.
Day 5	Sea life and Birds	"God saw that it was good," v. 21	**Blessings:** "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and the birds increase on earth" v. 22 **Food**: Green plants for food, v. 30
Day 6	Land creatures	"God saw that it was good" v. 25	**Food:** Green plants for food, v.30
	Human Beings	_	**Blessings:** "Be fruitful and increase in number fill the earth and **Role:** "subdue it... rule over every living creature," v. 28b **Food:** Plants and trees, v. 29.
	Heaven and Earth completed, Genesis 2:1	"God saw all that God had made, and it was very good," v. 31	–

The drama of creation occurs through God's spoken word, when God calls various members of creation into being by saying "let there be..." (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). The formula slightly diverts in verse 11, 20, 24 and 26b, where God says "Let the land produce vegetation;" "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures;" and "let us make humankind in our image," respectively. The created come into being through God's spoken word. They take their place in the stage of creation. This is significant in itself, since it characterises all members of the Earth Community as concrete products of the word of God. The light, sun, moon, stars and the atmosphere are God's word with us. When we see the sea, and its sea life we are seeing God with us. The dry grounds, its vegetation, animals and the birds are concrete attestation of God's word among us. The birds and their songs and people of all identities are products of the word of God. All nature, animate, non-animate members of the Earth and the whole Universe, are God amongst us. In other words, we are surrounded by the awesome presence of God in and through creation. This is perhaps best captured by the Gospel of John's opening, which reads: "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God...All that was made was made through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being" (1: 1). If we wish to hear or know the word of God, we just have to see any member of the Earth community. So in addition to the Spirit of God that was already hovering upon the face of the Earth, all members of the Earth community are God's word of life with us. They are images of God.

The dramatic narrative of creation confirms to the audience in three ways that indeed that which was spoken into existence came into being. First, the narrator follows God's spoken word by the short confirmation phrase, "and it was so," vv. 3, 7, 9, 11, 15, 21, 24, 27, 30. The confirmation phrase is repeated nine times with slight variations in verses 3, 21 and 27. Second, the narrator reports that which was created by outlining it almost just as God created it through direct speech. Third the narrator's confirmation features God the creator who sees that which was created, evaluates it and pronounces its

goodness.[25] This is partly captured in the repeated phrase, "And God saw that it was good" which, as the above graph highlights, appears seven times. God's spoken word is followed by God seeing that which was created, with great appreciation, a sentence that is repeated in almost all the days of creation. Although it is not stated on the second day of creation, the closing phrase in verse 30 which reads as, "God saw all that God had made and it was very good," makes it clear that the creator God highly appreciates all members of the Earth community. Indeed that the goodness of the created is eloquently proclaimed indicates that God praises and loves all the members of the Earth Community, thus underlining their intrinsic worth. According to Terrence Reithem... "the repetition of phrases provides a discernible rhythm: God said... let there be... and it was so.... And God made... and God saw it was good... and it was evening and morning."[26] Thus God speaks, acts, sees, evaluates and responds in relation to the created.

In his book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* Robert Alter discusses the various purposes of repetition such as emphasis, development of theme or plot, linking various episodes, and others. Repetition appears in various categories such as word for word, phrasal, imagery, action, thematic and episodic forms. Be that as it may, Alter underlines that when a deviation occurs from the pattern of repetition, the narrative is calling the attention of the reader/listener to something important. As he says, "the ideal reader (originally listener) is expected to attend closely to the constantly emerging differences in the medium that seems predicated on constant recurrence, ... what you look for more frequently is the small but revealing difference in the seeming similarities, the nodes of emergent new meanings in the pattern of regular expectations created by explicit repetition."[27]

---

[25] See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (San Francisco: Basic Books, 1981) 63-88, for an in-depth description of biblical techniques on narration and their functions.

[26] Terrence E Fretheim, "Genesis." In *The New Interpreters Bible* (Vol 1), 341.

[27] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (88-113), (97), "Techniques of Repetition," in the Bible.

In this drama of creation, two deviations are notable. The first one is found in verses 11, 20 and 24, which reads, "Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it," "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures," and "let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds," respectively. Following on Alter's argument, the audience in the theater of creation should note that there is a change, for God does not say, "Let there be vegetation on the land;" "Let there be water creatures;" or "Let there be animals that live on the land!" Instead of God creating directly, rather God invites the Earth to the stage to produce vegetation, water creatures and animals. The reader/listener must ask the purpose and meaning of the change. For me, as a reader/listener in this theater of creation, this is a notable point, for Earth is invited to share the stage to become a co-creator with God. The Earth is therefore not a passive host of the created members, but an active subject that produces vegetation and all living creatures.[28] The Earth will remain the major custodian of creation by ensuring the continued production of vegetation, animals and water creatures. This role places the Earth high up, as a partner with God the creator. By the end of the creation both human beings and animals have been given plants and trees for food. Such a privileged reader, or listener in the theater of creation knows that to destroy the Earth, which produces vegetation and animals as well as houses all other forms of life, indeed all members of the Earth Community, is tantamount to being a fool who destroys one's own house and source of survival. Yet the role of the Earth as a body that births vegetation and all living creatures characterises the Earth as female, an identity that makes both the Earth and women susceptible to exploitation and oppression.[29] In so far as the Earth births vegetation, water creatures and animals, the creation drama was not a punctiliar act, but an unfolding drama. The

---

[28] In the Setswana creation mythology, human beings were also produced by the Earth, emerging from it with their domestic animals. Indeed the chapter Genesis 2 version of creation characterises the first human being as created from the dust of the ground.

[29] See Heather Eaton, "Ecofeminist Contributions to an Ecojustice Hermeneutics." In Norman Habel ed. *Reading from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 54-71.

second deviation is on the creation of human beings, which is discussed in the section below.

As the introduction highlights, this re-reading of Genesis for the affirmation of the whole creation is dependent on the narrative depiction of Earth communities that precedes the creation of human beings covered in verses 1-25. All the non-human members of the Earth Community are characterised as "good" through the repeated pronouncement of God the creator. This pronouncement of their goodness is presented six times prior to the creation of human beings. The pronouncement sets the tone and mood of the setting, clarifying what it means to fill the Earth, to bring structure to its formlessness and to dispel its darkness. The repetition is understood by the human audience in the theater of creation as a clear message that all members of the Earth community were created by God; were created good; and the creator expects them to remain harmonious in sacred goodness.[30] Further, human beings sitting in the theater of creation are aware that, God invited the Earth to be a partner in the creation of some members of the Earth, thus elevating the Earth as a partner in creation. The introduction also highlights the importance of God as the active character in the chapter. God is, in fact, the main actor in the stage of creation. God is the creator of everything. Other active characters, such as the Earth, only do so in response to God's word (vv. 11, 20 & 24). The whole Earth community comes into being through the acts of the creator God. This in itself highlights the value of all members of the Earth, since their sacredness is undeniable.

Habel problematises God the Creator. He observes that, "In many interpretations, the Earth is understood to be valued or 'good' precisely because God invested Earth with value. ... "Earth is good because God

[30] See Rodney S. Sadler, Jr, "Genesis," In Hugh R. Page Jr., ed *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and African Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press) 70-79 (71) highlights the femaleness of God the creator with the African American image of God as "a mammy bending over her baby."

pronounces it good."[31] Counteracting this understanding, Habel gives the following re-reading:

> If, however, we recognise that the text speaks of a narrative event and a corresponding divine reaction ... God 'sees' the light (1:4), or earth emerging from the waters (1:10). God reacts to what God sees, and what God sees is good. Earth and the components of Earth in Genesis are valued as 'good' by God when God discovers them to be so, not because God pronounces them to be so. In Genesis 1, Earth is 'good' of itself; this is a reality God discovers...[32]

His re-reading underlines the intrinsic value of the Earth as something independent of God's creative hand and pronouncement.[33] The Earth is of value in itself, so much so that God discovers it as such! My response to Habel's re-reading is that faith needs to value the power of its own language in providing transformative perspectives for addressing culturally problematic perspectives than discarding it. For people of biblical faith and cultures, to keep the Earth good and sacred is part of worshiping the Creator God and living according to the will of God. Whereas science teaches a different theory about the origin of the Earth and the Universe, the language of God the creator who pronounces all the created Earth community as "very good" has a powerful impact on believers and biblical-based cultures on how they should relate with the Earth. It is language that provides ethics and morals of relating to the Earth Community. It is a language that retains positive power in the discourse of highlighting the intrinsic value of the Earth community as a whole, by inviting the reader/listener to keep the Earth in its state of goodness.

In addition to underlining the character of God as creator, evaluator and proclaimer of the goodness of the Earth, the dominance of Other

---

31 Norman Habel, ed. Reading from the Perspective of the Earth, 44.

32 Norman Habel, ed. Reading from the Perspective of the Earth, 44.

33 This perspective does not represent all members of the Earth Bible Team. See, for example, Paul Trebilco, "The Goodness and Holiness of the Earth." In Norman Habel, ed. *Reading from the Perspective of the Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 204-220, who is more sympathetic to this view.

members of the Earth Community, in terms of space and time they cover is a notable factor. From verses 1-25, the setting focuses on the creation of other members of the Earth community, in its splendor, its connectedness and its goodness as a significant theme. The setting is dominant through its length, mood, tone and the main character, God. The creation of human beings, on the other hand, is covered from verses 26-29b. It occupies just about four verses, which is a drop in the ocean. This indicates that human beings are minor characters in the creation drama. The purpose of minor characters is to reveal the major character, who, in this case, is God. Although it has been common to read the creation of human beings (especially verse 28) as the crown of creation, to see it as icing on the cake or to view the whole creation as a preparation for Human beings,[34] it is the perspective of this paper that this reading is problematic and incorrect. In other words, God's lengthy and meticulous process of creating everything good (vv. 1-25), underlines that Human beings enter the splendor of God's creation with the call to observe God's standard; namely, acknowledging that all members of creation are sacred in themselves and God expects them to remain good. It cannot be that the creation drama makes extended emphasis on the goodness of Earth members, only so human beings can destroy their beauty. With this background, we can now watch the entrance of human beings in the creation drama.

Genesis 1:26b-29: "Let us Make Humankind..."

It is the sixth day of creation! The theater curtain opens again after a short break! The reader/hearer sitting in theater of creation finally

[34] See "Genesis:" In The *Lion Handbook to the Bible* (Herts: Lion Publishing, 1973), 125-154 (126) that states that "Man is the climax of creation, superior to all else, but subordinate to his creator." Toni Craven, "Creation Story," 61, holds that "the six days creation climax in the creation of male and female in "the image of God"" (1:27).

comes upon the creation of her/himself! How will human beings respond to this part of the drama, featuring their origins?[35] God is on the stage flanked by all the members that have been created in the past five and half days. God looks at them and says, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, let us make them." As Alter cautions about changes from the predominant pattern of the narrative, the reader/hearer of the drama of God's creation of the Earth Community would have noticed the change. The creation of human beings, is the second (from the Earth becoming a co-creator with God) major deviation from the creative formula of God. There are four[36] major deviations in the creation of human beings. First, instead of God saying, "Let there be human beings," God says, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, let them have dominion..." (v. 26). The creation of human beings is consultative instead of God acting alone, or inviting a particular actor, as in the case of the Earth in verses 11, 20 and 24. Although this plural seems to come as a surprise, it really should not be the case, for at this point God is in company of all that has been created—the rest of the Earth Community.[37] It is best to understand this invitation as being said to the members of the Earth Community who have been created over six days. These are the stars, moon, sun, atmosphere, sea, dry land, vegetation, sea creatures land creatures—all that has been created prior to the creation of human beings.

The second notable change in the creation of human beings is the statement that human beings are to be created "in our image, in our

---

35 In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the play features a story about a king who is supposedly guilty of having murdered the former king in order to observe the response of the suspected king, who is supposedly sitting in the audience. Through his response, the investigative son of the former king concludes that he is guilty.

36 The fourth aspect pertains to the fact that the narrator does not report that, "God saw that it was good!" Although this omission applies to the creation of the atmosphere, is it significant that it is omitted in the creation of human beings. If one follows Alter's suggestion about changes from a regular pattern, then this omission might be worth significant reflection.

37 It is common to interpret the "Let us" as reference to other divine beings. See footnote 2.

likeness."[38] God's image is defined in plural, "in our image, according to our likeness," that is, including those who were invited/consulted in their creation. If we are agreed that the consultation was between God and the created members of the Earth Community, then this shared identity, "our image, our likeness" underlines that God identifies with the Earth Community. It also means that the created members of the Earth become partners with God, in the creation of human beings. This has been underlined above by highlighting that even before the creation of the Earth from formlessness, voidness and darkness, the Spirit of God was already hovering over its waters. But upon creation of every member of the Earth community through God's word was concretised on Earth in the formation each member. Hence, I have stated that the presence of all Earth members are God with us, highlighting God's presence on every aspect of Earth Life. The Earth and its members have become the spirit and body of God. Human beings are thus made in "our image in our likeness" in the sense that they rise from the Earth, which is divine. They are made in the image of the light, the atmosphere, the sun, moon, stars, vegetation, animals, water, the soil – in short, all that came into being through the creative word of God. Human beings are thus not apart or above the rest of the members of the Earth community, but are intrinsically part of the Earth and the whole universe. Moreover, they are equally sacred. In fact, they are products of the Earth and all its members.

The third and by far the most controversial aspects are the phrases "have 'dominion over' living creatures and 'sub-due the Earth.'"[39] The

---

[38] See Elisabeth A. Johnson, "Image of God." In Letty M. Russell and Shannon J. Clarkson, eds. *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1996) 149-150, who summarises how the phrase has been understood throughout history and how feminist scholars had to re-interpret it since it often excluded women.

[39] An interesting role of dominion here is that it is specifically over living things, but not over other human beings nor over vegetation. Had this been observed then such evils as colonialism would have been avoided, which involve the domination and exploitation of foreign lands and people. Perhaps this perspective is not accidental for a narrative that is often situated in Babylonian exile.

crux of interpretation has been the word "dominion," whose root word is dominate, thereby seemingly sanctioning human beings to have power over other members of the Earth.[40] To subdue and have dominion has been recognised for its kingly language, which is not egalitarian, communal or consultative. It seemingly sanctions human domination of the Earth. In an attempt to tame this posture, many readers have re- interpreted the word as the role of "stewardship". Somehow, while the suggestions seem to tone down the overt elevation of human beings, it is not clear if it succeeds in arresting its historical usage and potential damage. Following on the feminist framework, it is recognised that some stories and perspectives cannot be redeemed from their patriarchal ideologies, but remain useful in highlighting patriarchal dangers in the texts. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza has suggested that such texts should come with the label: "Caution! Could be dangerous to your health and survival!"[41] A very important part of reading Genesis 1:28 from a feminist Earth perspective could be to name this verse as indicative of the anthropocentric perspectives of our stories.

In my reading of the verse within the narrative setting of Genesis 1-25, dominion and subduing should be seen from the perspective of the creator God. God had dominion over Earth and subdued it from its formlessness, voidness and darkness by bringing light, giving light the power to rule the Earth, creating structure, inviting the Earth to be the co-creator and filling it up with all the members of the Earth community. Every member of the Earth was created by the Word of God, thereby becoming the image of God. Moreover, God so loved all

---

[40] In verse 29, where the creation drama gives food to human beings, it notably does not include animals or any living creature. Human beings are given vegetation for food. In the context of Genesis 1, having dominion over the animals therefore excluded killing living creatures for food, although it does not protect them from being used for drought power, pets, tourism, fun, domestication, medical purposes and killing animals for the skins or fat among numerous other uses and abuses.

[41] Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work," in Letty M. Russell. *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) 125-136 (130).

the members of the Earth community that he declared them to be good, indeed very good, as stated seven times. The Creator God also invited and elevated the Earth to become a co-creator (11, 20 and 24) and invited all members of the Earth to be in partnership and fellowship with Godself. God issued a consultative invitation to participate in the creation of human beings "in our image, our likeness," (v. 26).

Thus, George Kinoti argues that in verse 28 "God commanded human beings to care for and protect his precious creation."[42] Mercy Oduyoye underlines that "to have dominion over Earth involves being disciplined,"[43] that is, to remain within the framework of God's will for created Earth; to maintain the image of God on Earth. Human beings' role of having dominion and subduing the Earth is a thus a call to maintain the Earth in its goodness, in the God-standard of goodness. Although they are not verbs of the same root, the sun and the moon (vv.14-18) were also given ruling powers, over the day and the night. They rule by providing essential light that enables life to thrive on Earth. Such government does not contradict the standards put up by the creator God. The sun and the moon are not authorised to abuse their roles. It will be, and has been, a misreading on the side of human beings to assume that God expects them to dispense with the goodness of the Earth through use and abuse as well as overpopulation and depopulation of some species. Such an inter-pretation of dominion and subduing the Earth is not narratively supported. The drama, however, attests that God chose to share creative power with the Earth and the created members of the Earth, and thereby risked that changes might occur, when partners in creation fail to keep the God standard. Be that as it may, it does not nullify the fact that God's standard for creation is for the Earth to remain "very good" (v. 30).

Closely linked to the above concerns is the blessing to multiply and fill the Earth. The verse holds that after human beings were created,

---

42 George Kinoti, "Christians and the Environment," 616.

43 Oduyoye, M. A. "Except God." In M. A. Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of An African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (New York: Orbis, 2004) 12-17 (16).

God blessed them and said to them, "*Be fruitful, multiply* and *fill the earth*." It is important to note that this blessing was also given to birds and sea creatures (v. 22). The populations of the latter, however, have not yet reached an explosive pitch. [44] In short, to multiply and fill the Earth should be governed by the God standard of maintaining the Earth sacred and good. Since the context of creation underlines its goodness and sereneness, the human being is invited to inhabit the Earth with awe and respect of its goodness. Over populating the Earth and exploiting its resources to an unhealthy state does not amount to keeping the Earth and its members very good (v.30). Further, I believe that human beings do not need to read "be fruitful, multiple and fill the earth," only in terms of bearing children. Such an interpretation is again informed by anthropocentric perspectives. Yes, it may include bearing children, but it may sometimes mean planting more trees rather than bearing more children, as well as exploring and developing one's talents.

It needs to be noted that human beings were neither given power to have dominion over other human beings or to subdue them. Unfortunately, history is replete with misinterpretation regarding this withheld right. Men have apportioned themselves the right to subdue and have dominion over women; white people, high class people, heterosexuals, able-bodied people, adults and some ethnic groups have apportioned themselves the right to dominate and subdue blacks, people of low class, homosexuals, people with disability, young people and some ethnic groups respectively. The practice of Empire and colonialism, which, as Joseph Conrad puts it, is the "conquest of the Earth [in terms of] taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses," is the domination of foreign nations and the Earth. Moreover, the dispossession of the Other automatically hurts the Earth since the colonised are often crowded in some arid places resulting in an overuse of the Earth while the colonisers apportion themselves large tracks of land: *amapulazi amakiwa,*

---

[44] For Terrence Freitheim, "Genesis,"346, holds that such a blessing stated that human beings should fill the Earth then, but should such a time arrive, where we have filled the Earth, then the logical step is to act appropriately; namely, stop!

Baakiti! Low class and people of color often find that their residential areas are dumping sites of toxic wastes that cause serious health complications.[45] In short, the oppression of the other, who is human, is inseparable from the oppression of the Earth. Consequently, in his book *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff insists that we must, "connect the cry of the oppressed with the cry of the Earth" for "the logic that exploits classes and subjects peoples to the interests of a few rich and powerful countries is the same as the logic that devastates the Earth and plunders its wealth, showing no solidarity with the rest of humankind and future generations.[46]" Sitting in the theatre of God's creation reminds us of the rights of both the Earth and people to remain in the sacred space of God's created world.

Conclusion

The environmental crisis calls us to re-read the story of creation for eco-justice. In this article, readers/listeners of Genesis 1 are invited as the audience in God's drama of creation to hear anew God's will for planet Earth. The reading highlights the obvious; namely, that God is the main actor. The interpretation underlines the presence of God on Earth in every member of creation and God's high standard of keeping the Earth sacred and good. It highlights that the Earth is characterised as a host of God's Spirit, God's word, God with us, host of all members and is the co-creator with God, vv. 11, 20 and 24. It is further proposed that the whole Earth community is made through

---

[45] See Steven Bouma-Prediger, "Environmental Racism." In Miguel A de la Torre, ed. *Handbook of US Theologies of Liberation* (St Luois: Chalice Press, 2004) 281-286 (283) who writes that, "race is the best predictor in identifying communities most likely to be location for toxic waste sites," points out that, "three out of the largest commercial hazardous waste landfills in the United States are located in mostly Black or Hispanic communities."

[46] Leonardo Boff. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1997, xi.

the word of God, and thus bears the image of God. The latter is extended to Human beings through God's consultative invitation— "let us make humankind in our image." For human beings to fill the Earth, to have dominion over living creatures, to subdue the Earth, to multiply and fill the Earth is read as adhering to the God given standard of recognising the sacredness of all members and to work towards maintaining the goodness of all creation, thereby being mindful of the image of God in the rest of the Earth Community. The dominating setting of verses 1-25 and the minority position of human beings in the passage, who occupy about four verses in the drama of creation, underlines the former as the main theme and message of Genesis 1. Having sat in God's creation theater means that readers/listeners come out with the rallying voice of *God saw all that God had made and that it was very good,* a role human-beings are invited to uphold as members of the Earth, made in God's image. This re-reading seeks to reassert the self-evident ecological model that views human beings as species within the larger Earth community, inevitably interconnected with other ecosystems, arising from them, and dependent upon these systems for survival, and not above or apart from them.

References

Alexander, Pat, ed. *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Oxford: A Lion Book 1978, 129-154.

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. San Francisco: Basic Books 1981.

Assohoto, Barnabe and Samuel Ngewa, "Genesis." Tokunoh Adeyemo eds. *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006, 9-84.

Leonardo Boff. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Phillip Berryman. New York: Orbis Books 1997.

Bouma-Prediger, Steven. "Environmental Racism." In Miguel A de la Torre, ed. *Handbook of US Theologies of Liberation*. St Luois: Chalice Press 2004, 281-286.

Craven, Toni. "Creation Story." In Letty M. Russell and Shannon J. Clarkson, eds. *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*. Louisville: Westminster Press 1996, 61.

Eaton, Heather. "Ecofeminist Contributions to an Ecojustice Hermeneutics." In Norman Habel ed. *Reading from the Perspective of Earth*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2000, 54-71.

Fretheim, T. E. "The Book of Genesis." In *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. Nashville: Abingdon 1994, 321-49.

Gordon, Edward, J. *Writing About Imaginative Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers 1973.

Habel, Norman C. *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth, Vol 1*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2000.

Hallman, D. G. *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*. New York Orbis Press, 1994.

Hooke, S. H. "Genesis." In Matthew Black ed. *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, 175-207. London: Routledge 1962.

Johnson, Elisabeth A. "Image of God." In Letty M. Russell and Shannon J. Clarkson, eds. *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*. Louisville: Westminster Press, 1996, 149-150.

Kistner Wolfram. "Koinonia: The Church Creating Community." In M. Guma. & L. A. Milton, eds. *An African Challenge to the Church in the 21st Century*. Cape Town: Salty Print 1997, 133-146.

Kinoti, George, "Christians and the Environment." In Tokunoh Adeyemo, ed. *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers 2006, 616.

Luz, Ulrich. *Matthew 1-7: A Continental Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985.

Niditch, S. "Genesis." In C. Newsom & S.H. Ringe, eds. *The Women's Bible Commentary*. Lousville: John Knox Press 1992, 10-25.

Mcfague, S. A New Climate for Theology; God the World, and Global Warming. Minneapolis: Fortress 2008.

McFague, S. "Creation." In L. M. Russel, & J. Shannon-Clarkson eds. In *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*. Louisville: John Knox 1994, 60-61.

Lion International. "Genesis." In David and Pat Alexander, eds. *The Lion Handbook to the Bible*. Herts: Lion Publishing 1973, 125-153.

Oduyoye, M. A. "Except God." In M. A. Oduyoye, Beads and Strands: Reflections of An African Woman on Christianity in Africa. New York: Orbis 2004, 12-17.

Plaut, W. G. "Genesis, Book of." In John Hayes ed. *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press 1999, 436-442.

Radford Ruether. "Eco-Feminism and Theology." In Hallman, D. G. *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*. New York Orbis Press 1994, 119-206.

Rossing, Barbara R. "For the Healing of the World: Reading Revelation Ecologically." In David Rhoads, ed. *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2005, 165-184.

Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. "The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work," in Letty M. Russell. *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1985, 125-136.

Trebilco, Paul. "The Goodness and Holiness of the Earth." In Norman Habel, ed. *Reading from the Perspective of the Earth*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2000, 204-220.

SECTION B

MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA AND HEBREW BIBLE NARRATIVES

IV. The Ecofeminist Reading of the Story of the Birth of Moses

Paul Leshota

Summary

The Biblical book of Exodus, which includes, Moses' birth narrative has, for the most part, been associated with the themes of conquest, redemption and liberation, particularly political liberation. Though the theme of conquest may have been a later addition to the exodus theme, its inclination towards the exodus paradigm, and their claim over God's commitment to Israel's wellbeing, cannot be overemphasised. This exodus – political liberation nexus, notwithstanding, that the book of exodus, explicitly and implicitly, intersects issues of liberation and its implications for gender justice, struggle for land and environmental significance and role in the protection of both the oppressor and the liberator, cannot be ignored. Using the optic of ecofeminist hermeneutics, this paper looks into the story of the birth of Moses for possible linkages between the themes of land, environment, gender on one side and that of liberation on the other, and ways in which such a perspective can help in reimagining relationships between humans and Mother Earth.

Introduction

The Bible is predominantly a male story written by men, and women enter the male narrative playing second fiddle to men mainly as mothers, wives and daughters (Yee, 2012:43). Patriarchy and androcentrism were the ideologies around which the whole kinship system of ancient Israel evolved. Men enjoyed more privileges and women and nature were only favoured by the system through their association to men. According to Sahinidou (2017:249), women and nature acted as the backdrop against which men, with their alleged sense of superiority, displayed their power and control. Taking cue from the extant

dualistic paradigm of the time, which viewed the earth as the machine, with God as the designer and humans as operators, the latter enjoyed the liberty to exercise their dominance on both women and nature (Habel, 2000:41). This anthropocentric tendency has, until recently, dominated the debates within the fields of ecological theology and Biblical hermeneutics with debilitating effects on the relationship between humans and the environment.

The remnants of the predominance of this ideology, despite the many years of struggle to bring it down, still rear their ugly head in protest. Our liturgies, hymns, philosophies, Bible interpretations and theologies still, to a great extent, reflect the longstanding male hegemony that subjugates and violate female voices, bodies and experiences. As humans we are at the stage where the effects of the twin abuse of Mother Earth and women violence are devastatingly astronomical. Normal Habel (2000:10) captures this predicament so lucidly:

> Earth is facing an environmental crisis. This crisis threatens the very life of the planet. The atmosphere we breathe is being polluted. The forest that generate the oxygen we need to survive are being depleted at a rapid rate. Fertile soils needed to provide food are being poisoned by salinity and pesticides. Waters that house organisms essential to the cycle of life are being polluted by chemical waste. Global warming has become a frightening threat...This crisis is so pervasive, destructive and insidious that academics, biblical scholars, theologians and religious practitioners can no longer ignore it.

Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si* (2015) and his latest Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia* (2020), as well as WCC Statement on Climate Change Emergency (2019) remain some of the most powerful Church official documents against the assault to Mother Earth and the plundering of the Earth's natural riches by the profiteers**.** Islam**,** Bahai faith, African Indigenous Religion have not only raised concerns on Climate Change, its causes and effects, they also have some important lessons to share with the rest of the globe. Almost all of them agree on their call for global ecological conversion which has leanings towards treating nature as one and indivisible gift which includes "environment, life, sexuality, the family and social relations" (Francis, 2015:#6; Francis, 2020:#8, WCC 2019).

In truth, unless extraordinary measures are taken to counter the onslaught on the threat to our planet, our means of livelihood are gradually being depleted. When the bodies that played the role of co-creators with God, in bringing us forth into life, are being constantly battered and violated, there is no hope for any redemption to our planet. Unless the earth out of which and together with God moulded us into existence and from which we are continuously nurtured, are not taken care of, there cannot be any hope for the future.

However, the last four decades have seen the increase in the social activism that culminated in, amongst others, the emergence of ecofeminist sensitive readings of people, issues and texts (Ewing, 2003; Nkechi & Asika, 2017; Quinby, 1990; Salleh, 1992). This paper, using the ecofeminist lens to re-read the story of the birth of Moses (Exod.2:1-10), aims not only to retrieve traditions that may have been hidden by other vested interests but also to discern attitudes within the texts as a result of which the earth or the earth community – which is aptly defined by Dube (2015:230) as co-creator with God – may have suffered damage or exclusion (Habel).

Setting the Scene: Exodus 1:1-14: Ignorance breeds hatred and hatred violence

The majority of scholars are agreed that the story of the birth of Moses (Exod. 2:1-10) is a self-contained literary unit though forming part of the larger unit that runs from Exodus 1:15- 2:10 (Baden, 2012:140; Cobb, 2011:49-50). Exodus 1:1-14 provides an important background that connects a smaller family which is now growing into a nation in keeping with the promise made by God to Abraham (Gen.17:15). It introduces the entire exodus narrative, which recounts the creation of a nation admist what Inbar Raveh (2013) describes as crushing slavery culminating in a cruel decree of the annihilation of the entire Israelite male progeny. It also provides an explanation why Israel's fortunes suddenly turned into a tragedy. The new king had come to power and did *not know* what Joseph did for Egypt. Egypt's association with Israel

through *knowledge* of Joseph had obtained for Egypt blessings and abundance not only for the land but also for its people and their guests. Egypt had thus become not only a place of safety and hospitality (Yafeh-Deigh, 2020) but also the symbol of life, productivity and prosperity. As in a refrain, the text keeps on harking back to the theme of Israel's numerical spread (1:7,12,21-22). It is a theme that reminds us of God's intention in creating humans: "In order to be fruitful and multiply." (Gen.1:28).

As if in the magic wand, the king's ignorance of what Joseph did, turned the fortunes of Israel into miseries. The new king of Egypt, with a stroke of a pen, sent the Israelites from riches to rags. He moved from a sustainable economy that puts God and people at the centre to an economic structure that fed on exploitation for sheer personal aggrandisement (Exod. 1:8) and political expediency (Exod. 1:10). Israel's increasing numbers in the land had now begun to pose a threat to the new king. His insecurity and that of his people, which could be dubbed xenophobic, derived from his lack of *knowledge* for Joseph (Exod.1:8). Egypt's relationship towards Israel, therefore, became one of hatred, suspicion, torture, misery, cruelty, force, ill-treatment all of whose intention was to sterilise and render unproductive both men and women of Israel. Ignorance or lack of knowledge – which represents destitution of knowledge about something or someone – leads to stereotyping, prejudice and myth about the other (Matusitz, 2012:92). Exodus 1:10-11 is a puddle of prejudices and stereotypes emanating from unfounded fears bred by ignorance about Israel, who has suddenly become the "Other". The latter confirms what has become a common mantra in imperial studies that ignorance breeds fear and fear breeds hatred and hatred leads to violence.

The story of the birth of Moses 2:1-10 is set, therefore, against the backdrop of two opposing scenarios. In one, Egypt under Joseph was a symbol of conviviality, inclusiveness, interconnectedness and interdependence that knew no barrier based on race, gender, religion, class or status. In the latter, ignorance and therefore bias and prejudice had no place. In the other, Egypt through ignorance of its new king a wall of fear, prejudice, suspicions, exclusion and alienation is built between and among people who had hitherto lived in peace, harmony

and enviable economic stability. Those who used to live as brothers and sisters now settled for a new relationship of master and slave which was characterised by separation, otherness and animosity. The subsequent acts of violence on children and the trauma meted on the rest by Pharaoh's decision achieved the reinvention of the differences that did not, for some time now, matter amongst Egyptians and the Israelites. Through this type of violence Pharaoh was trying to achieve what Pieterse et al. (2018:33) call, "some sort of deceptive social order" that would render his actions morally justifiable. However, despite Pharaoh's resolve to mete out death dealing actions on Israel, the latter continued to represent in the most consistent of ways, the symbol of life and God's will and blessings (Exodus 1:9,12).

A point made by Olojede (2020), in quoting Thorsten, that the theme of migration in general and that of forced migration in particular are central to the Pentateuchal tradition is very valid. Circumstances often forced patriarchs and their families to relocate to new places. I wish to concur and add that this story continues the theme of migration in its various forms and at various levels. There are several migrations and border-crossings in this episode. There is an epistemic migration from the knowledge of Joseph to ignorance about Joseph on the part of Pharaoh. That led to psychological migration in that Pharaoh became anxious and suspicious as a result of not knowing what Joseph had done for Egypt (Exodus 1:8). There is also a migration of identity. Israel shifted from being a neighbour that Joseph had made her to be, to being a potential enemy who could side with enemies of Egypt in times of war (Exodus 1:8-10), with power-laden implications involving much strive and "the struggle for shared space, resources, survival and identities (Dube & Leshota 2020). The harmonious and neighbourly relations between Israel and Egypt to that of Master versus Slave relationship with its attendant psychological alienation, trauma, conflict, resentment and identity crisis further constituted a shift in identity. Goshen became not anymore one of the regions of Egypt but a unique physical space identifiable with an ethnic group called Israel, the "Other" who cannot be trusted. It became an immigrant camp, reminiscent of our modern refugee camps.

Enter Shiphrah and Puah: Exodus 1:15-22: Knowledge as Key to Life-Giving Relations

In the context of repression, hard labour, mistreatment, hatred, misery and cruelty (vv.11-13) and on the stage that had hitherto been populated, unsurprisingly, by males, enters the first two of the five "feisty women who are instrumental in the birth and survival of Moses" (Janssen, 2018:9). Within a culture that privileged men and disenfranchised women and in a book that has been used as a club to batter women (Yee, 2012:41), the introduction of the two midwives in name, is remarkable. The royal order to the two midwives, founded on ignorance and unfounded fear, is for them to act contrary to their professional pledge and obligation. This is typical of the majority of empire stories where the powerful reduce the rest to docility through various means in order to serve the interests of the empire and those associated with it. Raveh (2012) puts it candidly:

> This is a typical story about the survival of the weak who had been dominated in a situation of cruel domination. The dominated people is compared to a powerless woman using guile and cunning in her struggle to survive. The story presents the narrative of servitude and redemption as a sort of guerrilla war, consisting of everyday acts of resistance against the ruler.

The king, who has no experience of what the actual act of birthing means, as it works through the body of a woman, can afford to just say a word and hope to have it complied with. Without asking any questions and pretending he knew all that these midwives needed to carry out his orders, the king just "told" them, "If a Hebrew woman gives birth to a girl, let the child live. If the baby is a boy, kill him." In that way the king becomes an embodiment of power that flows from his position at the helm of an empire which enjoys dominance and hegemony. Relations of power symbolised in the king's fears, albeit, unfounded, to enslave, repress and to kill the Israelites all point to the manner of behaviour of the colonising powers.

The act of resistance and disobedience to the king's orders – with the possibility that the midwives were operating within the royal space as

a royal harem – are motivated by the midwives' fear of and faithfulness to God. Their theology of resistance was founded on the conviction that God is the God of life and not of death. It is in this sense that Cone (2014:12) chooses to name them models of life-giving. Their wily response to the king is an indication of the extent to which they could go in protecting and redeeming the creation of God. In the process the king becomes the symbol of scorn, brutality and death while the two midwives symbolise resistance, sagacity and life. Their trickery reflects what Steinberg (1988:10) describes as a "humorous reversal of power – where the one expected to wield authority is under the thumb of the weak."

Though they embody weakness that is pitted against power personified in the king, it is the two wet-nurses who win "over the strong, not by revolution or strength, but by cunning and outwitting the boss; and in prayer – the prayers of a troubled people trying to "make it over" while searching for a life of decency and humanity on this earth" (Hayes, 2000:615). Theirs was a theology that emerged out of concrete life situations that demanded an answer in the here and now. It became a theology of resistance which subverted the discourses of power and defied the tyranny of the king, by attacking the very foundations of that power without any veneer of a revolution (Yee, 2009:7-8).

In the face of a difficult situation Shiphrah and Puah imagined and subscribed to a theology of life. Their resistance to the king's order to kill is an outward expression of the fear of and respect for God. Theirs is a God of life who identifies with and blesses those who fear and respect the God of life. These blessings come in many forms and endowment with children is one manifestation of God's goodness and blessings to those who are faithful and who respect God.

The magnanimous conduct of the midwives earned them a reward of being counted among those who participate in God's procreative work while Pharaoh continues to do well as an angel of death whose critical decisions are founded on perceptions (Exodus 1:8). He started off by commissioning the death of Hebrew boys to the midwives and ended by commissioning everyone in the nation to throw Hebrew boys into

the Nile River and thereby polluting the source of livelihood for people, animals and vegetation. If the first commission could be described as ego satisfaction, the second is an act of extreme lunacy. In the view of both Shiphrah and Puah, faithfulness and knowledge of God are the highest in the hierarchy of values. Despite the accolades that are warranted for Shiphrah's and Puah's courage and determination one cannot shirk a feeling that their actions evolve around advancing a patriarchal agenda, which is to safeguard Moses who is destined for the leadership of a community (Fein, 2014:10).

Hebrew Boys Marked for Death: An Ecofeminist Reading of Exodus 2:1-10

In what Dube (2015:230) would have called a theatrical experience on which the drama is staged, the audience is in suspense and patiently waiting for the action that would bring a solution to the environmental catastrophe. The environmental destruction was occasioned by the decision of an individual to remove God from the centre and set himself above and against both God and the rest of the Earth community. It is in narrative terms called a complication in that the birth of a baby boy is set against the background of a decree to have all "Hebrew-born sons killed" (Ruiten, 2006:47). The question that could be asked here is: Are there ways in which the non-human characters, humans and the divine have intersected and acted as co-agents in the play of life enhancing interdependence in this narrative?

Raymond (2008:85) suggests that characterisation in literature is traditionally limited to human and divine beings and that non-human characters are understood simply as either no characters at all or as stage decors facilitating plot progression of the narrative. Ecological hermeneutics has added an important dimension in the reading of literary texts where Earth, with its human, non-human and divine components, is interpreted as the total ecosystem, the web of life (Miller, 2008:123). In light of this principle our reading of the text will explore the web of relationships between these different elements of

the Earth community while also not losing focus of the feminist dimensions of the text.

The unit begins with a scenario where a combination of unlikely elements of the ecosystem connived to protect and save a boy marked for death by a royal decree. An only man on the stage, who is introduced by his tribal and marital associations, is mentioned once and never after. His only action is identified as "married" or as others have preferred, "went and took for wife" with connotations of having sexual intercourse (see Exodus 21:10)[1]. The active human characters on the stage are the three women: the mother, the sister, the king's daughter (her servants as well), without whom there would be no child, and the baby without whom there would be no story (Fein, 2015:8). Important too, are the non-human characters which include the basket, the tar, the tall grass, Nile River (2:3), the river bank (2:5). The involvement of the women has to be read against the background of the order from the throne to have every baby boy thrown into the Nile. It further explains the activity filled role of Moses' mother. She *conceived* and *bore* a son; she *saw* it was a boy; she *hid* him; she *made* a basket; *covered* it with tar; *put* the child in it and *placed* it in the grass along the river. Her over-involvement is not surprising. The maternal instinct would have moved any mother to do what she did.

---

[1] This action of taking to wife seems to easily play into sexual objectification discourses (Loughnan et al. 2015) where women bodies are only useful to the extent that they are sexualised and serve the interests of men. This kind of discourse finds validation in both culture and the Bible almost all of which are entrenched in patriarchy. Exodus 2:1 seems to evoke what Muguti & Sande (2019:199) calls women's sexual autonomy revolving around men. The idea of a man "taking to" wife in the Hebrew sense and not vice-versa is suggestive of the men's agency in marriage and its sexual aspect and the woman's submissiveness. Such an interpretation is consistent with biblical worldview. As Betzig (2005) observes in her interesting article on *Politics as Sex: The Old Testament case*, that despite the fact that God mandated people to be fruitful and multiply, it was men who *took to women*, it was men who were said to plant the seed, it was the powerful men, the patriarchs, the judges, the kings who had more wives; who had sex with other men's women; who had more concubines; who had sex with servants and slaves and fathered, therefore, many children. The subject of the act of "taking to wife" a female is a man. On that basis, Betzig (2005:326) rightly deduces that marriage, its sexual aspect and power went together and it was in men that power resided.

Whether by design or accident, the absence of the father is evocative of what has become a widespread and problematic phenomenon of "absent fathers." Perhaps, the association between birthing process and women could also provide a reasonable conjecture for the absence of the father from the scene. The baby's sister is equally involved in the unfolding drama. She keeps watch over the baby from a distance. She further offers to secure a Hebrew woman who would take care of the baby. Pharaoh's daughter is closely aligned to the Earth material. She and other women used the water of Nile River for bathing and possibly other things – confirming in the process that the Nile was an important resource for the community. She interacted with almost the same Earth material that the Mother of the child interacted with, except that she *came* down, *saw* the basket, *sent* one of the young girls, to *pull* it out (v.5), *opened*, *saw*, *felt* sorry (v.6), *told* her (v.9), *adopted* him (v.10). The chiastic structure that Siebert-Hommes (1994:71) proposes, goes to confirm the extent of the involvement of these three women plus the servant women in the salvific story of Moses' birth. Though the three (Mother, Sister and Princess) dominate the narrative plot, their actions revolve around the baby boy confirming in the process what Savran (2003) said, that, though they feature prominently – with things to do and say beyond their menial roles of mothers and wives –women are given authority only in the pursuit of male interests.

In our case, it is in the interest of the birth of a male heir to become the leader and liberator of the people of Israel. This androcentric bias notwithstanding, that the actions of the three women are a clear reflection of individual and collective courage, intelligence and compassion, cannot be missed. In what the king saw as an occasion to express xenophobic rage and tyranny on the environment, the women used that occasion to heal and mend relations between and across racial boundaries as well as between people and the Earth material. Reading this unit with a feminist lens, we cannot fail to make claims that these women, "played an important role in Israel's salvific history" (Fein, 2015:11). Moses' fate and salvation is bound with theirs, as much as theirs is bound to the Earth material whose fate in bound with theirs, constituting what may be called a "cycle of reciprocal beneficence." In this cycle, human and non-human Earth community, are the whole

body. Each member of the whole body owes it to each member to live and to constantly account because the whole body depends on the responsible response of each member to survive.

A closer look at the text, draws our attention to a web of relationship between the human and non-human characters. Nile River[2], which is recalled from the previous chapter, becomes not only a non-human actor but a space on which the whole drama unfolds. One cannot fail to note the tension on how the Nile River, with its water, reeds, tall grass and banks, is depicted in the text. In Exodus 1:22 it is a space and an instrument at the disposal of the king in the killing of the Hebrew boys. In Exodus 2 it becomes a source of life and a symbol of liberation. This tension evokes the symbolism the River Nile enjoyed in Biblical memory. It was both a symbol of life when it provided water needed to sustain the life of humans, plants and animals, and a symbol of death when water dried up or when a person or an animal fell into it (Edelman, 2014:1). The River Nile, the basket, the tall grass and the tar could all be said to be the products or the material of the Earth. In this regard, therefore, the Earth and the Earth material are, in the words of Wainwright (2008:134), drawn into relationship with the human. They act together with humans as co-agents in the act of saving the child. They thus become important and indispensable players in the cycle of reciprocal beneficence.

When at the end of the story the baby is given by the mother to Pharaoh's daughter for adoption, we are given a sense that the suspicions, the stereotypes and prejudices that characterised relationships between the Egyptians and the Israelites were beginning to dissipate. Not by themselves, but because each of the Earth community members was allowed to play a role in the unfolding of the narrative.

---

[2] Though known and respected for its fecund properties, the Nile could have proven very destructive when it was in flood. Its essence was personified in the god Happy who was represented as a well-fed figure with both male and female features with the green and blue colors which symbolised life. Huffmon 1999:706 (Harper's Bible Dictionary).

Implications for an Ecofeminist Reading

Our suspicion has confirmed that a long-standing bias towards anthropocentric interpretation has devalued, silenced and suppressed the voices of non-human and women characters in Biblical texts. The Biblical narratives have lopsidedly focused on the theme of salvation history, with male human characters playing a dominant role. In the process, the voices of non-human actors and those of women, especially, have been silenced. The story of the birth of Moses is no exception. Its title betrays the anthropocentric and patriarchal bias of the unit. Pharaoh is vested with the powers of king and he decides on the basis of ignorance to kill all male children. Moses' father though not mentioned in name, his association with the tribe of Levi is suggestive of the fact that we are engulfed in patriarchy. Mention of the tribe of Levi[3] is eloquent in its silence. It focuses the reader's attention to Moses, who becomes yet another male figure who not only advances the theme of salvation history but is also set as a prototype of a saviour in the New Testament.

In what Habel (2000) calls an interpretive strategy of identification, both the human characters and the Earth material, acting in concert to protect the child, are also protesting the victims of Pharaoh's unfortunate decision to which they could only watch in utter helplessness (Miller, 2008:125). Identification with the characters, including the non-human characters – which are often side-lined by traditional interpretations – has made it possible for us to gain a fresh perspective on the story and to retrieve layers that would have remained hidden in the text. Characters who would have otherwise been simply ignored, emerged and thickened the plot. Nile River feels the pain,

[3] Levi is one of the sons of Jacob (Israel), who is now the Patriarch of the tribe of Levi. These tribes are not only patriarchal, they are also patrilineal. The mention of both the father and the mother of Moses as coming from the tribe of Levi suggests that we are thinking within the system that does not only regulate how men and women should relate but also how men should relate amongst themselves. I concur with Becker (1999:24-25) that though "the oppression of women is not the point of patriarchy, a social system that is male-identified, male-controlled, male-centered will inevitably value masculinity and masculinity traits over femininity and feminine traits."

groans under the burden of Pharaoh's arrogant decisions, and needs to be heard in its call for justice. The basket, the tar, the tall grass in concert with the women actors played an important role in standing up to Pharaoh's claim to rule. At the end they become characters with a positive perspective (Habel, 2008:7).

Reading this story in the light of the current crises of global warming and persistent violence against women, light is shed on the dynamics that are involved.

Firstly, untethered power that Pharaoh – acting within the context of both patriarchy, and royalty – claimed to have is paradigmatic of the power displayed by modern multinationals and some governments whose decisions have plunged the entire globe into an ecological crisis. This was, and continues to be, done despite voices of protestation (Paris Agreement; COP 25; UNFCCC) by concerned parties as well as the Earth itself. A majority of these decisions have proven to be short-sighted and based solely on self-interests and driven by greed and profiteering (WCC Statement on Climate Change Emergency 2019).

Secondly, the disregard of the links between natural ecology and human ecology is patent in Pharaoh's system of thinking. That same inclination seems to be common with some global leaders who, one after the other, fail to appreciate the relationship between human society and Mother Earth whom she calls, "our Sister" - which is so critical for the prolongation of personal, familial and communal survival (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 2015 # 31). The groaning of the Nile under Pharaoh's arrogant decision continues under current global leaders, who despite the obvious adverse consequences on the earth manifest in a myriad of Hurricanes, Cyclones, Typhoons, Landslides and Wildfires, are more than ever before determined to go ahead with their self-seeking behaviors at the expense of the entire ecological community (WCC 2019). The threat to the earth's critical resources (Amazons, Congo basin, West Papua), which are home to both the indigenous peoples, cultures and the environment with rivers and streams teeming with fish; the natural forests and their endowment of medicinal plants and fruit trees, is more flagrant than ever before (Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia* 2020 #9).

Thirdly, the modern tendency to downplay the positive role females can play in social interaction and in critical decision making resonates with anthropocentrism that finds support in both culture and religion behind this text. Pharaoh's decision to deceive the midwives into killing the Hebrew male children might have been founded on the perception that women are susceptible to being more abused than their male counterparts. This would make sense within the context of a Biblical culture, which grew out of a world where patriarchy permeated every aspect of life. Even as I say this, I am aware of voices that see the Bible as a book with variegated voices than as monovocal even on men-superior vs women-inferior nexus (Pokrifka, 2013; Shapira, 2010; Frymer-Kensky, 1994; Ologede, 2012). However, the foundation of the entire Biblical Narrative of salvation on predominantly male characters and their influential role in how the entire narrative unfolds, with female characters playing second fiddle, cannot be missed. It is this detail and similar others which continue to fan the patriarchal and androcentric attitudes towards women throughout the life of the Christian Church. Such attitudes have been and continue to fuel and reinforce the mechanisms of power that are at the root of women's experiences of extensive violence, abuse and dehumanisation.

Fourthly, the manner in which the character of the father is introduced, as "taking to wife" a woman from the same tribe serves two aims. The first one is to confirm that Moses is not of a mixed race but is of pure blood and that both father and mother were married, confirming his legitimacy to inheritance. The second one, which is implied, is that in Old Testament Judaism, marriage was patriarchal in structure. Within that relationship, a husband was characterised as *ba'al 'issah* (master/Lord of the wife) while the latter was called *be'ulat ba'al* (the subordinate of the master) (Zimmerman, 2011:371). On that basis, despite this seemingly hurried mention of a nameless man who comes into the story only to "take to wife" and leaves the stage, there is more than meets the eye. Marriage, which is what is being spoken about here, served a utilitarian purpose of maintaining the family "through procreation" (Zimmerman, 2011:367). It is not a surprise, therefore, that patriarchs went into their maids or even concubines when their wives did not bear children for them (Genesis 30:3)

and even when they did. Both Bilhah and Zilpah, though maids of Jacob's wives, Rachel and Leah, respectively, begot children for Jacob. Betzig (2005:329) argues convincingly that marriage, sex and power went together and that they play a role in the sexualising of women's bodies and the treatment of women as sexual objects (Muguti & Sande, 2019; Loughnan et al. 2015).

The action of "taking to the wife" by the anonymous man in Exodus 2:1 is an exercise in the husband's lordship over the wife and of the wife's subordination to the husband. The power and the privileges that the latter retains as a man do not require his presence. There is always that invisible hand of patriarchy even as women seem to feature prominently on the stage. The latter confirms a common phenomenon in both politics and social interactions that a man does not have to be physically present for him to be elected into a leadership position by women whose numbers in anyone meeting (Mtshiselwa, 2015:7) far exceeds those of men.

Conclusion

The starting point for this paper is the obvious protest of the Earth against abuse by humans. The floods, the droughts, deforestation, air pollution are occasioned more by, rapid population growth, increase in consumption of resources and uses of polluting technologies. Over and above this environmental devastation, there is an equally disconcerting issue of women oppression and abuse. All of them require our immediate attention. Given the fact that some of these abuses have been perpetrated at the implicit behest of Christians standing on the biblical pedestal, this constitutes a theological problem.

It is this concern that prompted the ecofeminist reading of the story of the birth of Moses in an effort to contribute towards confronting the problem at the core. The ecofeminist reading of the story has yielded many positive insights. Through looking with suspicion at the text and the traditional anthropocentric perspective behind it, and identified with the players in the text, we have been able to see how

Pharaoh xenophobic decision has affected both humans and the environment. Looking at the story through the ecofeminist eyes has made it possible to view the important role that all women played in the unfolding story; and how it helped to focus our eyes beyond Pharaoh's rule and Moses' possible leadership role in the salvation history, to the groaning of the environment under Pharaoh's brutal edict as well as the salvific role that both humans and the Earth material played in saving not only Moses but the environment as well. In what we call the "cycle of reciprocal beneficence", the interdependence among and between the different members of the Earth community is not only important but also indispensable if we are to offset an environmental onslaught on our planet.

References

Joel S. *Baden*, From Joseph to Moses: The Narrative of Exodus 1-2, in: *Vetus Testamentum* 62 (2012), 133-158.

Mary, *Becker*, Patriarchy and Feminism in: University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1999 (1/3) (1999), 21-88.

Laura Betzig, Politics as Sex: Old Testament Case in: *Evolutionary Psychology* 3 (2005), 326-346.

Elana *Bloomfield*, Conceiving Motherhood: The Jewish Female Body in Israeli Reproductive Practices in: *Intersections* 10 (2) (2009), 227-269.

Kirsi *Cobb*, A Woman on the Border: A Feminist-Structuralist-Deconstructive Reading of the Character of Miriam in Exodus 2:1-10; 15:20-21 and Numbers 12:1-16. *PhD Thesis*. University of Wales, Bangor. 2011.

Melissa *Cone*, 2014. Restoring Life-giving in a Life-taking World: Lessons from the Life-giving Women of Exodus. *Senior Thesis for Honors Program*, Liberty University. 2014.

Musa *Dube*, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. Chalice Press, St Louis. 2000.

Musa *Dube*, And God Saw that it was Very Good: An Earth-friendly Theatrical Readings of Genesis 1: Introduction: Sitting in the Theatre of Creation in: *Black Theology: An International Journal*, November, (2015), 230-246.

Musa *Dube* & Paul *Leshota*, Breaking the Masters' S.H.I.T.H.O.L.E.S: Doing Theology in the Context of Global Migration, (2020), Upcoming.

Diana *Edelman*, The Nile in Biblical Memory in: Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin (eds), *Thinking of Water*. Berlin: de Gruyter, (2014), 1-22.

Maureen *Ewing*, South African Women's Literature and the Ecofeminist Perspective. MA Thesis, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, (2003).

Sarah *Fein, A Gracious Woman Gets Honor: Women in Exodus 1:8-2:10 in Jewish Interpretive Tradition*. Harvard Divinity School, (2014), 1-25.

Sarah *Fein*, All the Women went out After Her: Women in the E Narrative of Exodus: A Feminist and Source-Critical Approach, (2015), 1-19.

Tikva *Frymer-Kenskey*, In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myths. New York: McMillan (1992).

Norman *Habel, Readings from the Perspective of Earth*. Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield. (2000).

Norman *Habel*, Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics in: N.C. Habel and P. Trudinger (eds), *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, (2008), 1-8.

Rosalind *Janssen*, A New Reading of Shiphrah and Puah – Recovering their Voices in: *Feminist Theology* 27 (1) (2018), 9-25.

Steve *Loughlan* et al., Exploring the role of culture in sexual objectification: A seven nation study in: *RIPS/IRSP*, 28 (1) (2015): 125-152.

Jonathan *Matusitz*, Relationship between Knowledge, Stereotyping, and Prejudice in Interethnic Communication in: *Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural* 10 (1) (2012), 89-98.

Susan *Miller*, The Descent of Darkness over the Land: Listening to the Voice of Earth in Mark 15:33 in: N.C. Habel and P. Trudinger (eds), *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*.123-130. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, (2008), 1-8.

Ndokhokele *Mtshiselwa*, Reconstructing a Deuteronomistic Athaliah in the (South) African context: A Critique of the patriarchal perception of women in: Verbum Ecclesia 36 (1), Art. # 1384, 8 pages. *http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v36i1.1384* (2015).

Mavis *Muguti* & Nomatter *Sande*, Women's Sexual Bodies: Dealing with Women's Sexual Autonomy in Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe in: Kugler Joachim & Gabaitse Rose, The Bible and Gender Troubles in Africa UBP, BIAS 22, (2019): 185-201.

Jane *Nkechi* & Ikechukwu *Asika*, Women and Ecology: An Eco-Feminist Reading of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart in: *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 2 (4), (2017), 33-40.

Funlola *Olojede*, Gender, Foreignness and Class in the Migratory Journeys of Naomi, Ruth and Orpah: A Female African Migrant in: Dube Musa & Leshota Paul, *Breaking the Masters' S.H.I.T.H.O.L.E.S: Doing Theology in the Context of Global Migration* (2020), Upcoming.

Funlola *Olojede*, Being Wise and Being Female in Old Testament and in Africa in: *Scriptura* 111 (2012:3), 472-479.

Tanya *Pieterse*, Vanessa Stratford & Juan Nel, Relationship between symbolic violence and overt violence in hate incidents in South Africa in: *Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention* 16 (2) (2018), 31-43.

Pope Francis, Papal Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*, Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, (2015).

Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*, Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, (2020).

Junia *Poprifka* (ed.), Women in the Bible. WACO, TX: Centre for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2013.

Lee *Quinby*, Ecofeminism and the politics of resistance in: Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (eds), Recovering the world: The Emergence of Ecofeminism, San Fransisco, Sierra Club Books, (1990), 122-127.

Quinn *Rathkamp*, Childbirth Through Time in: WWU Honors Program Senior Projects, 56. *https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors/56*, 2-17.

Inbar *Raveh*, They let the Children Live: The Midwives at a Political Crossroads in: *Nashim: A Journal of Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 24, (2013), 11-26.

Person *Raymond*, The Role of Nonhuman Characters in Jonah in: N.C. Habel and P. Trudinger (eds), *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, (2008), 85-90.

Ionna *Sahinidou*, Ecofeminist Theologies Challenge Domination in: *Open Journal of Philosophy* 07 (03), (2017), 249-259.

Ariel *Salleh*, Deeper than Deep Ecology: The Eco-Feminist Connection. *Environmental Ethics* 6 (4) (1984), 339-345.

George *Savran*, Esther Fuchs, Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Bible as a Woman *Review*, JSOT Supplement Series, 310, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, (2003), 244.

Ladislaus *Semali* & Elisabeth *Shakespeare*, Rethinking Mindscapes and Symbols of Patriarchy in the Workforce to Explain Gendered Privileges and Rewards in: *International Education Studies*, 7 (2) (2014), 37-53.

Jopie *Siebert-Hommes*, But if she be a Daughter – She May Live: Daughters and Sons in Exodus 1-2 in: A. Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, (1994), 62-74.

Amnon *Shapira*, On Woman's equal standing in the Bible- A sketch: A Feminist Re-Reading of the Hebrew Bible: A Typological view in: *Hebrew Studies* 51 (2010), 7-42.

Naomi *Steinberg*, Israelite Tricksters, their analogues and cross-cultural study. In J.C. Exum, J. Boss (eds), Reasoning with Foxes in: *Semeia*: 42, (1988), 1-13

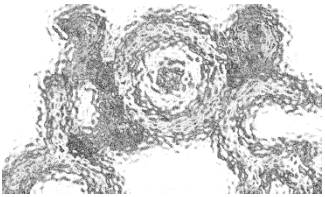
Elaine *Wainwright*, "Healing Ointment/Healing Bodies: Gift and Identification in an Ecofeminist Reading of Mark 14:3-9 in: N.C. Habel and P. Trudinger (eds), *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, (2008), 131-139.

WCC Statement on Climate Change Emergency, 2019.

Alice *Yafeh-Deigh*, A Re-evaluation of Jesus and his Family's Migration Story through the Framework of Inter-dependent Hospitality in: Dube Musa and Leshota Paul, *Breaking the Masters' S.H.I.T.H.O.L.E.S: Doing Theology in the Context of Global Migration* (Upcoming Publication) (2019).

Gale *Yee*, The Silenced Speak: Hannah, Mary and Global Poverty in: *Feminist Theology* 21 (1) (2012), 40-57.

Ruben *Zimmerman*, Marriage, Sexuality, and Holiness: Aspects of Marital Ethics in the Corpus Paulinum, *Acta Theologica* 31 (2) (2011), 363-393.



V. Stories We Know: Empire, Land and Gender in the Book of Ruth

Sidney K. Berman

Summary

This chapter examines the interplay of issues of empire, religion, land, environment and gender in the narrative of Ruth. These issues tend to intertwine in the abusive context of colonialism. In this chapter, religion is represented by the interpretation of the Torah, which gave the colonialist the notion of moral superiority over the indigenous people. The sense of moral superiority normally escalated to that of racial superiority and resulted in the entitlement to dominate, abuse and massacre the indigenous. In certain areas, the narrative of Ruth is a critique of the imperial attitudes of the Israelites towards the Moabites. I argue that in other areas, the narrative thrusts forward the label "Moab" or "Moabitess" in order to present the people and the land of Moab in good light. The sections of the chapter are as follows: An apology for Moab; Torah pronunciations on Moab; Moabite women – the alleged producers of an illegitimate nation; Imperial thoughts against the local woman; The imperialist's land; Stories we know about Mother Africa; False narratives against Mother Earth, and; Mother Moab, Mother Africa and Mother Earth.

Introduction

This paper examines the interplay of issues of empire, religion, land, environment and gender in the narrative of Ruth. These issues tend to intertwine in the abusive context of colonialism. In this paper, religion is represented by the interpretation of the Torah which gave the colonialist the notion of moral superiority over the indigenous people. The sense of moral superiority normally escalated to that of racial superiority and resulted in the entitlement to dominate, abuse and massacre the indigenous. In certain areas, the narrative of Ruth is a critique of the imperial attitudes of the Israelites towards the Moabites.

I argue that in other areas, nonetheless, the narrative thrusts forward the label "Moab" or "Moabitess" in order to present the people and the land of Moab in good light. The sections of the paper are as follows: Theoretical framework – demolishing othering stories; An apology for Moab; The Torah and Moab; Moabite women – the alleged producers of an illegitimate nation; Imperial thoughts against the local woman; The imperialist's land; Stories we know about Mother Africa; False narratives against Mother Earth, and; Mother Moab, Mother Africa and Mother Earth.

Theoretical Framework – Demolishing Othering Stories

The theoretical framework that runs throughout this paper is a criticism of the colonial and imperialistic mindset that tends to "other" natives by composing false stereotypical stories about them. Othering views and presents a person or community as an anomaly, with the view to perpetually treat them as strangers. It is done by people who perceive themselves to belong in a superior culture and/or race, targeted to people whom they perceive to belong to an inferior culture (Rey 2012:71). Othering dichotomises and mystifies the natives against the colonisers so that the two parties must not consider themselves as equal or as belonging together (Cf. Schulze 2013:17). The framework of othering and composing negative stories is appropriate for this interpretation of the story of Ruth because of the historically unequal relationship between Israel and Moab in which Israel was supposedly superior to Moab. Israelite stories about Moab were negative and imperialistic, but they were not the reality that the Moabites knew about themselves. In this chapter, we see that the negative stories are proved wrong; Ruth the Moabite lives the true positive story of who she is, and serves as a representative of the people of Moab to demonstrate who they are. In the book of Ruth, Ruth the Moabite tells the story she knows.

An Apology for Moab

From the first time that Moab was known to Israel as a people, or at least as an ethnic group, there has largely been negativity. It is significant that when Moses interpreted the law at great length to the Israelites, it was in the land of Moab (Deuteronomy 1:5). One can argue that the Law of Moses, which was to give Israel its identity, was interpreted in Moab with the intention to make conspicuous the contrast between God's expectations and undesirable realities, the epitome of which was apparently Moab. It appears that Moab was presented as a perfect contrast of what the Israelites should become, as far as the Mosaic Law was concerned. Moses' choice of venue thus gives credibility to Israel's entrenched negativity towards Moab. Therefore, an interpretation of the Torah contributed towards Israel's denigrating perception of the Moabites. Gerda De Villiers and Jurie Le Roux argue that by so-doing, Moses made Moab an interpretative space for the Torah (2016). These scholars note that the author of the book of Ruth seeks to radically reverse this interpretation and correct the negative mindset of the Israelites concerning Moabites (*ibid*).

That is why the place Moab matters very much for the plot of the author of Ruth. Whereas the moniker Moab mattered for the wrong reasons in Israelite narratives, this time around, it matters for a good cause. It is as if, for once, the story is being told from a Moabite perspective, or as if Ruth is telling Israelites her own story. It is the kind of story that rightfully honours Moab and reminds Israelites that Moab is good for Israel. It is the story that Ruth and her people in Moab know about themselves. This perspective is not universal. For example, Monica Rey interprets the high frequency of the reference "Ruth the Moabite" as a negative "othering" of Ruth and Moab (2012). Laura Donaldson unfortunately also sees the presentation of Moab in the same way (2008). Nonetheless, I argue that Ruth stood out not because of othering but was different just like her great grandson, David, who would invariably stand out from any crowd (Cf. 1 Samuel 17 where young David displayed reckless bravery when everyone else cowered). Where Ruth's foreignness is invoked, it is so that Moab stands out in a positive way. The only suggestion of negativity for Moab comes where Elimelech and his sons die in Moab (Ruth 1:3 and 5). However, the narrative appears to lay the blame on Elimelech's

lack of trust in God rather than the unsuitability of Moab. From then on, reference to Moab is in the form "Ruth the Moabitess" which is always made in a positive way.

Ruth the Moabitess turns out different. Her mixed marriage with Boaz does not lead to apostasy or a turn away from Yahweh, but leads to a turn towards Yahweh (Ruth 4:14; De Villiers and Le roux 2016: 4). Ruth gives birth to Obed, the father of Jesse who becomes the father of David (Ruth 4:17). King David was responsible for a turning towards God that encouraged many Israelites to find God. Ruth the Moabitess did not even turn the heart of Boaz away from God but Boaz remained steadfastly devout to Yahweh. For a change, we have a whole book dedicated to the praise of a foreigner who is celebrated as an ancestor of the Messiah (Ruth 4:15). Not only is she a foreigner but is a Moabite, of all people. When the family of Elimelech went to escape the famine, the author chose that they escaped to Moab and not any other country (Ruth 1). Furthermore, the author chose that a genealogy appears at the end of the chapter, giving Moab a place of honour in Israelite history and even in the descent of the Israelite Messiah (Ruth 4:17-22; De Villiers and Le roux 2016). The author not only chose Moab for the special setting, but also deliberately chose the temporal setting as "the time of the judges" (Ruth 1:1). This is soon after the nation settles down, and Moab immediately proves to be a refuge. The expression "the Moabitess" is used repeatedly so as to make Moab stand out in this wonderful story. Moses himself died in Moab just before the children of Israel entered Canaan (Deuteronomy 34:5) and he gave a long speech that became a big part of Deuteronomy, which is correctly his interpretation of the Torah. After that, the nation enters Canaan and soon attempts to settle down.

The Torah and Moab

The Torah warns that the threat to the wellness and prosperity of the nation of Israel is not enemy armies but the seduction of the nations that they will find in that land (Exodus 23:33). Nonetheless, concerning Moab, Georg Braulik (1999) effectively argues that the law was not written against Moab (or Ammon). In fact, in the book of Ruth, no

one appears to question Ruth's right to gleaning (Ruth 2) and the right to levirate marriage for both Moabite widows (Ruth 3 and 4; Braulik 1999). Braulik argues that the book of Ruth was written as a lecture to explain Deuteronomy chapters 23 to 25. According to his argument, the chapters were misinterpreted by the Israelites to mean they must refuse allowing Moabites and Ammonites into their assembly and outlaw inter-marriage with them (Braulik 1999:1). Reuven Chaim Klein (2015) articulates a closely-related argument concerning Deuteronomy 2:28-29, which nullifies the basis on which the Israelites ostracised Moabites. The Moabites were outlawed partly because they supposedly refused to give Moses food. Instead, in Deuteronomy 2:28-29, Moses does defend the Moabites, saying that they gave Israel food when Israel passed through (Klein 2015: 94).[1] Scholars divide the protagonists of this Torah debate as inclusivists and exclusivists. De Villiers and Le Roux (2016) mention a number of inclusivists and exclusivists. The book of Jonah, Isaiah 56:1-8, the book of Judith and the book of Ruth are inclusivist as regards welcoming foreigners into the Israelite community (De Villiers and Le Roux 2016).

The Torah warned that nations will seduce Israel into immorality, heathen practices, intermarriage and a forsaking of Yahweh the Israelite God. This backsliding would bring the nation to its downfall. It would be the punishment of a jealous God who cannot accept competition with any other god (Deuteronomy 5:9). This line of interpretation for the Mosaic Law was embraced by colonialists to achieve racial discrimination, displacement, enslavement and massacre of the indigenous. The laws and crimes of apartheid South Africa are a good example. In particular, colonialists of Dutch origin called Africans "kaffir," which meant "non-believer" or heathen. They presumed themselves to be the God-chosen race that had been commanded to invade and claim for themselves foreign lands. Being a special nation lasted for as long as they stayed faithful to their religion, and as long as they preserved the purity of their Caucasian seed. Similarly, the

[1] Reuven Chaim Klein unravels the remaining few bases that led the Israelites to discriminate against Moabites. This argument cleared the way towards justifying the role of the book of Ruth in presenting a fresh interpretation of the Deuteronomistic law.

Israelites were special to God only as long as they stuck to exclusive Yahweh worship and avoided contaminating the Abrahamic biological seed. As can be deduced, the problem with Israel's backsliding is that it is supposedly not intrinsic to Israelites –it is introduced from other nations. Therefore, for the nation to avoid apostasy, they must not inter-marry or mingle with the nations of Canaan (Deuteronomy 7:3). Joshua 23:7 holds that to marry the remnants of foreigners in their midst will cause the Israelites to "mention" the names of the foreign gods, to "swear by them" and to "bow" to them.

The Torah comments on the threat posed by the surrounding peoples including Moab. Deuteronomy 18:9 and 12 say that when the Israelites have come into the promised land, they shall not learn "the abominations of those nations [...] and because of these abominations, the LORD your God is driving these nations out of your presence." Nehemiah interprets the Torah to prohibit mixed marriages. According to Nehemiah 13:1 & 3, "On that day, they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and there was found written that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation forever. Then it happened that when they heard the law, they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude." Moreover, the book of Moses says "Neither shall you enter into marriage with them; do not take their daughter for your son, and neither give your daughter to their son" (Deuteronomy 7:3)**.** Nehemiah immediately applied the law to all foreigners so that not only the Ammonites and Moabites were expelled from the congregation, but all non-Israelites. Ezra 9:1-2 says that he heard how even the Levites, the priests, have taken for themselves the daughters of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites, so that the holy seed has been mixed with the people of those lands. He says when he heard this, he rent his clothes in shame, pulled out his hair by its roots and sat down in stupefaction (verse 3).

Moabite Women: The Alleged Producers of an Illegitimate Nation

The negative attitudes of Israelites to Moabites originated from the belief that Moabites were an illegitimate nation produced from incest, drunkenness and intrigue. The nation of Moab allegedly came into existence when two daughters secretly got their father drunk and lay with him so that they could fall pregnant (Genesis 19:30-38). The first child born from such an act was called Moab while the second was called Ben-Ammi – these sons became the ancestors of Moabites and Ammonites. The derision in the story is manifold, for it means that firstly, Moab were bastards. Worse still, the mother was the sole mastermind behind the existence of such an illegitimate nation because the father was not consulted. Secondly, Moab were allegedly products of incest, which means they were considered to be mentally retarded. Thirdly, the fact that they were conceived in drunkenness means they are unlikely to have any kind of self-control. In short, Moabites were supposedly illegitimate, incestuous, immoral and retarded. Incest, immorality and retardation were taboo in the ritual and moral laws of the Torah.

Worse still, that story was damaging to the image of Moabite women. It pointed largely to the supposed moral impurity of Moabite women and less on that of Moabite men. The same way that the imperialist has an attitude to the local woman. Unsurprisingly, in accordance with what Israelites could expect of Moabite women, a negative story crops up in Numbers 25: The people of Israel camped in Shittim, at the border of the promised land just before entering. There, Israelite men committed prostitution with the daughters of Moab. They were seduced to whoredom, but they also went further to make sacrifices to Moabite gods and to bow down to them (verses 1ff). Surprisingly, there is no report of Moabite men committing prostitution with Israelite women, supposedly because Israelite women were too pure to agree (Cf. Donaldson 2008: 162). In particular reference to Moab, Deuteronomy 23:3 says, "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD, even to their tenth generation." In the preceding verse, it says, "A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their 10th generation shall they not

enter into the congregation of the LORD forever." These subsequent verses obviously mean that any person of Moabite origin is a bastard.

Imperialist thoughts against the Local Woman

An imperialist gender prejudice is evident in the story of the alleged prostitution of Moabite women and Israelite men (Numbers 25). As far as whoredom is concerned, on the one hand, it is common that the imperialist or colonist's women are presented as pure and innocent and having no interest in seducing the foreign man (Green 2018:703). Any sexual contact between the imperialist's women and the local strangers is likely to be interpreted as rape (Cf. the story of Dinah and Shechem the Hivite in Genesis 34). On the other hand, the local woman is presented as less pure because she is commonly cited in a consensual sexual exchange with the colonial men (Woan 2008). We observe that the daughters of Moab were supposedly not molested but consented to sexual contact with Israelite men.

Worse still, the Israelite men were condemned for polluting themselves rather than for seducing or taking advantage of the Moabite women. The question is why we should believe that Moab men would allow their women to freely mingle with Israelite men whereas Israelite men would not allow their women to freely mingle with Moabite men. It is a sign of entrenched prejudice on the side of the author that he probably did not notice his own inconsistency. If there are immoral Israelite men that can be seduced by Moabite women, then there must be immoral Moabite men who can be seduced by Israelite women. If there are immoral Moabite women who can give themselves over to immoral Israelite men; then there are immoral Israelite women who can give themselves over to Moabite men. The reader must expose the common colonial belief that the local girl is immoral whereas the colonist's women are morally pure.

The imperialist refuses to marry the native girl, viewing her as racially inferior to him (Woan 2008). Nonetheless, the imperialist often likes to sexually entertain himself with the local girl. Her sexuality was regarded as "naturally excessive and extreme against a white female

norm" (Woan 2008:280). Indeed, the local girls are viewed as prostitutes, albeit desirable ones. Rayna Green notes that the white man uses the supposedly hyper-sexual native girl while preserving the "good" white women so that they can stay pure (Green, 2018:703). When he is done playing around with native girls, there's a nice girl from among his people whom he will marry (Cf. Woan 2008:281).

The Imperialist's Land

Like the imperialist's women, the imperialist's land must supposedly be left to the imperialist's people. But the indigenous person's daughter and land are expected to be accessible to the imperialist. Therefore, the African immigrant is not wanted in the imperialist's land because s/he is known to only consume and not contribute anything to the land of the imperialist (Honig 1993:54); yet when the imperialist goes to a foreign land, he is allegedly doing it a favour. Brexit, vis., the exit of Britain from the European Union, the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency and recent victories of nationalist supremacist political parties in most of Europe all betray a protest against the mixing of nations within their own land (Detrow 2016). One of the major causes of Brexit was a protest against the so-called influx of immigrants. The US election was a referendum on immigrants, closing borders and the mixing of nations. Obviously the majority of voters in the US, Britain and European countries that chose nationalist parties do not want the mixing of nations. These are double standards because by colonialism, they have proved that they do not mind mixing themselves with Africans on African soil. Even currently, white supremacists still come to Africa as tourists, enterpreneurs and missionaries, occupying the land and mingling with Africans (Signe 2019). The imperialist says that he does it for a good cause; he supposedly exploits the land in the name of science, industrialisation and development, whereas the local supposedly exploits nature ignorantly and destructively (White 1967). Nonetheless, it is almost always the other way round.

Stories We Know

Nations do not perceive themselves primarily in derisive terms, even if they acknowledge certain weaknesses in their make-up. The positive story about Ruth the Moabite most probably mirrors the story of Moabites about themselves. They know their true story – a story that they can identify with. It is even better that such a positive story is set for the most part outside of Moab. Even better still, it is set inside of Israel, of all places, which lends it sincerity. When in a foreign setting, countries tend to identify with a sincere and positive image of themselves. As regards sincerity, a good example is when, inside closed doors in the Oval Office, US president Donald Trump labeled El Salvador, Haiti and African countries as 'shithole countries' (Watkins and Phillip 2018). He was angrily contending against those that were pleading for leniency for immigrants, and he gave a sincerely Donald Trump perspective. His narrative was widely criticised, and no one from the referenced countries volunteered to publicly defend him. As sincere as he was, his perspective was wholesomely rejected. "Shithole" is not the identity of any country or continent, let alone Mother Africa. If Donald Trump had been positive or empathetic towards these countries to his fellow Americans, the authenticity that is communicated by such a setting would have led the countries in reference to identify with his story. That is, Salvadorians, Haitians and Africans would have embraced his perspective. The fact that the story of Ruth is told in Israel to appeal to a traditionally hostile Israelite audience significantly lends it sincerity.

Soon after entering the land, indeed intermarriage and apostasy start to happen. In the book preceding the book of Ruth, which presents the setting for the events of Ruth, individual judges are introduced by God because of the taking and giving of daughters in marriage, and the sons and daughters of Israel started to follow other gods. The history of Israel in Palestine sometimes says that it is because of mixed marriage that Israel backslid many times, became immoral and idolatrous, and were exorcised out of the land by God. The last instance of apostasy before captivity (1 Kings 11:1-8) is also referred to by Nehemiah (13:26): It happened that when Solomon became old, his wives turned his heart away from God to other gods. This invoked the

anger of YHWH, the nation splits - and Israel's history steers towards the downfall of the Northern Kingdom and then of Judah.

The real stories that we know and embrace do not say that we are shitholes. Even if we had no praise for our countries, we know how our poverty was started and perpetuated by imperialists – and how our economic gains and political stability were reversed by supposed super-power countries. Vitchek (2013) interviewed Mwandiro Mhanga, head of the Social Democratic Party in Kenya who lamented that "what the United States and other Western countries are doing all over this continent and all over the world is a much greater terrorism and it triggers terrible consequences". Conflicts on African soil driven by Western interests have scattered millions of desperate Africans all over Africa, Europe, the US and other continents (*ibid.*). There are widespread narratives that neo-colonialism often tries to push under the carpet. True narratives of the scramble for Africa, human trafficking, genocides, exploitative/destructive industriali-sation, stealing of minerals and valuable resources, colonialism, political and military interference, attempted regime changes, economic sanctions and many other atrocities committed by western imperialists are the major causes of African migration to western countries (Cf. Gregoire 2017; Jones 2015). The US president omitted to note that the USA plays a major role in causing African and other countries to become so-called "shithole countries."

In criticism of Trump's perspective, Robert Fantina (2018:2) denounces a foreign policy that habitually meddles with the economic and political affairs of a weaker country, accuses it of human rights abuses, punishes the country with economic sanctions, causes riots and political turmoil, and then engages in repeated military interventions that paralyze the country further.[2] Joshua Berman (2017) outlines the USA's military provocation and intervention as follows:

> First, get the CIA to fund, arm and train some local insurgents (if needed, bring some from abroad); next, embed US special forces with these local insurgents and provide them with FACs (forward air controllers, frontline

[2] Fantina was discussing the book "How the US Creates 'Sh*thole' Countries" edited by former member of House of Representatives, Cynthia McKinney.

> soldiers [...]); deploy enough aircraft in and around the combat zone to support combat operations day and night [...] provide the friendly insurgents with an overwhelming advantage

The economic, military and political consequences of this meddling, has often led to mass migrations by local populations, to which Trump responded by calling the countries "shithole countries." Instead of accepting a derisive "shithole" story about herself, Mother Africa is justified to point to this larger story.

The author of the story of Ruth the Moabite tells the story apologetically from the standpoint of Moabites. Demonstrating genuine love and affection for a fellow human being, at the beginning the Moabites are not only represented by Ruth but by all the Moabites in the story. For example, Naomi is moved to bless Orpah and Ruth on the basis of their kindness, saying, "... the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me" (Ruth 1:8). Moreover, Orpah also loved her mother-in-law that she too demanded to go back to Bethlehem with her; along with Ruth, she wailed with a loud voice on two occasions when they parted (1:9, 10 and 14). Moabites are kind people. That is the story they know and confirm by action, despite denigrating stories from elsewhere.

Back in Bethlehem, the Moabites now have a representative who will tell and live their story as they know it. For example, Boaz confesses that "all the people of my city know that you are a virtuous woman" (Ruth 3:11). Ruth will also live an industrious life that proves that Moabites are not sluggards, even though she works not to prove a point but to feed her mother-in-law, Naomi. In Ruth 2:7 & 17, Ruth worked at gleaning from morning until evening, amassing much harvest in the process. This is the story of industriousness that the Moabites know about themselves. Ruth's sacrificial love for Naomi evokes Jesus' new commandment to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). Ruth clung to Naomi (Ruth 1:14). Indeed, Naomi's speeches to her daughters and to the women of Judah (Ruth 1:13 and 20) proved that she was attacked by relentless depression, and Ruth witnessed it every day (Ramaribana 2012:49). To prove that she was always thinking about Naomi, Ruth saved some food for her mother-in-law when she ate at Boaz's farm (2:18).

Of all the positive stories that Ruth could tell, the biggest is her obedience to God's commands, firstly as regards her love for God and secondly her love for her neighbour. Ruth even calls Yahweh by name as she takes an oath to never part with Naomi, meaning that this Moabitess knows about the God of Israel (Ruth 1:17). One of the negative stories that had been told about Moabites was that they were not interested in the God of their great uncle, Abraham. Abraham was the uncle of Lot, the ancestor of the Moabites (Genesis 14:12; Genesis 19). Instead, Ruth displays even greater love for Yahweh and Yahweh's people than the Israelites themselves seem to. She says, "Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God [...] may Yahweh severely deal with me if anything but death makes us part" (Ruth 1:16 and 17). Madipoane (ngwan'a mphahlele) Masenya comments that the words are so strong that they "sound like those addressed by a wife-to-be to a husband-to-be" (2013:2). This is commitment to being part of Naomi's people, especially since they are God's people. It is also commitment to serve God whole heartedly. It is an embodiment of the command, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength" (Luke 10:27). This is the story that Ruth tells on behalf of the Moabites; – the story that her people know about themselves.

False Narratives against Mother Earth

Oppressive neo-colonialists do not only tell false stories against Mother Africa, but they also do it against Mother Earth. They say Mother Earth naturally wears off, and human beings are not to blame for global warming, increasing droughts, heat waves and cyclones, climate change and the tearing of the ozone layer, and even deny that global warming is happening (GW False 2019; Lober 2018). When Donald Trump and the Republican Party assumed the presidency and control of government, they resumed coal mining and high carbon emissions that had been reversed by their predecessors. That change was due to an imperialist anthropocentric school of thought which holds that human activity does not cause global warming and climate

change. The Republican Party, Conservative Christians and White Supremacists who are either Donald Trump's advisors or his sources of information, belong in this school of thought. Therefore, Sarojini Nadar (2014) advocates for an overall suspicion of master narratives of knowledge, particularly coming from oppressive patriarchal perspectives. These master narratives omit the cries of women, the earth and the colonised. Gale A. Yee (2012) notes "the muteness and invisibility of the women raped in Judges [chapter 21] and those in our times." She gives the 2006 example of 27,000 reported cases of rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the majority of whom remained silenced. Instead of silencing Mother Earth and expecting her to accept the false story that she naturally tends towards barrenness, we must allow her to tell her own story about how she became dilapidated. We must believe Mother Earth's grievance and tell the story that indeed humankind has over-exploited her.

Musa W. Dube (2015:233) explains the root of humanity's destruction of the earth as follows:

> Human beings apportioned to themselves the right to exploit and dominate the Earth and other members of the Earth Community. This posture is defined as a framework of viewing the Earth from dualistic, hierarchical and anthropocentric perspectives, which regard the Earth and all other non-human members of the Earth as lower than human beings and available for endless exploitative use.

Thomas King (2016) gives an example of earth destruction by so-called development projects. The project would "devastate some piece of your heritage in the natural or built environment – your neighbourhood, or the landscape you love, the family farm, the hill where your tribal elders seek visions, the stream where everybody in your valley goes to fish" (King 2016). Another example is cited by Vitchek (2013) where Chomsky blames Europe for "dumping toxic waste into the ocean off the coast of Somalia, killing off the fishing grounds and then complaining that the people turned to piracy."

In view of crimes against the environment, many have advocated for "green criminology," a "fifth international crime law" that deals with "ecocide crime" (Cf. Higgins 2012 and White 2017). Robert White suggests that criteria be set for criminalising environmental crimes

like "pollution of air, water and land; illegal trade in endangered species and abuse of animals; deforestation; issues relating to genetically modified organisms (GMO); corporate colonisation of nature; toxic and e-waste dumping; and so on" (2017). This law would correct the accusatory stories against Mother Earth and force humankind to stop and reverse the destruction of the planet.

Mother Earth's story is that, in the words of the GEF's chairperson, Naoko Ishii, greenhouse gas emissions went up after 3 years of stagnation, deforestation has increased again, and biodiversity has dropped by 60% since 1970 (Naoko 2018:1). Dube (2015:233) testifies that even during her few decades of inhabiting the earth, "the climate used to be more predictable and friendly when she was younger than it is of late." David Rhoads lists the various environmental atrocities which one can only wish were abating by now: the deterioration of the ozone layer, global warming, toxic waste disposal, deforestation, desertification, loss of biodiversity, etc. (cf. Rhoads 1992:1). These symptoms are Mother Earth's appeal to mankind to engage in practices and projects of environmental conservation and recovery.

As those that have over-exploited Mother Earth, we must not be surprised when she shows signs of pain. These signs of pain are her narrative which comes in response to our exploitation of her. We must own up to the truth and echo the words of the Adelaide Declaration, namely, "We confess that we have sinned against Earth, defiled the land, polluted the seas and the atmosphere, violated the forests and devalued God's creation" (Habel 2013). The story must be listened to and retold by those that respect the truth. Furthermore, the act of owning up must be followed up with organised efforts to repair the damage and restore Mother Earth to her former state of productivity and habitability. On this, the Adelaide declaration pledges as follows:

> As members of the Earth community, we commit ourselves to joining with the Earth community in its struggle for justice, by listening to the cries of the whole Earth community, and working with the Earth community to repair the damage done to God's Earth. We also commit ourselves to working with the whole Earth community to nurture all life, both sentient and non-sentient, and to developing ways of living that sustain all life.

In view of Genesis 19:30-38 and other denigrating stories about everything Moabite, possibilities are that if the story were told from an overall Israelite perspective, reference to the great grandfather of David's descent may not have been made; a comment might have been made to the effect that Ruth's advances on Boaz were lustful and; Boaz would not have been made to admit that the whole village knows Ruth to be a virtuous woman (Ruth 3:11). Mother Africa, women and the girl child have a story to tell about their exploitation as well as a positive story about their make-up. They should be allowed to tell their story, and that story must be respected by all.

Mother Moab, Mother Africa and Mother Earth

Moab became a mother to the starving family of Elimelech, just as she was already home to the nation of Moab. To Elimelech and Naomi, Moab was a place where to escape the famine of Bethlehem. The narrative does not state what caused the deaths of the male members of Elimelech's family, but apparently, it was something other than famine in the land. Moreover, there is no indication that Moabites were suffering or dying from what killed Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. The Moabites were doing well. What caused Naomi to return to Bethlehem was the fact that her economic supporters had passed away. As for Ruth the Moabitess, her insistence to leave her country was not so as to escape famine or disease but was for the love of her mother-in-law. Moab appears to have consistently been a good mother to her people. Any symptoms of negativity towards Moab in the narrative of Ruth are the ones that the author is seeking to oppose and reverse. To the credit of Elimelech's family, it is worth noting that they had no imperialist biases against Moab. The biggest sign of this is that their sons married Moabite women, and the parents actually loved these daughters-in-law. This is in stark contrast to the mindset exposed in the section above, namely, "Imperialist thoughts against the Local Woman."

Thus, Moab was a mother to foreigners, destitutes, orphans and widows in fulfilment of God's commandments. Indeed, God had commanded Israel in Leviticus 19:34, "The stranger who resides with you

shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt." Deuteronomy 10:18 refers to God's love for the disadvantaged of society and says, "He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing." Being prosperous themselves, the Moabites gave Elimelech the chance to change his fortunes and redeem his family. After he died, they gave his widow and orphans a chance, too. In observing God's law that way, the Moabites become more Israelite than Israelites themselves. Masenya (ngwan'a mphahlele) urges that Judah has more to learn from the so-called heathens of Moab (2013:3). They do not harbor negative stories against Israel but offer them hospitality and lend them a helping hand. The man of faith, Abraham, failed to offer the same compassion and equality to Hagar and other females by rather making them his slaves (Genesis 24:35). He even allowed Sarah to abuse and chase away Hagar (Genesis 21:10). This was despite the fact that wherever he travelled as he escaped famine, he was treated generously and compassionately by the hosts (Genesis 12:10ff; Genesis 20:1ff). Israel herself, in viewing non-Israelites as unclean and inferior, and looking down on aliens, betray blatant disobedience to God's commands (Acts 10-11). In this regard, Israel becomes the coloniser.

Mother Africa, prior to colonialisation, provided life and opportunity for livelihood to her inhabitants who included forests, ploughing fields, water sources, precious stones and soils, animals, human beings, vegetation and others. All these suffered exploitation and abuse at the hands of colonialists who viewed them as negatively primitive. Science, masculinity and ferocity were exalted and made to stand in opposition to nature, femininity and tranquility. Colonialism quickly sabotaged African peoples' cultures and religions that existed in harmony and cooperation with nature. Industrialisation led to deforestation, disappearance and deformation of many natural features, global warming, pollution of water sources, soils and the general environment and the trafficking and murder of human beings. Worse still, the proceeds of the exploitation of resources in Mother Africa were not utilised for the benefit of Africa and her natural inhabitants but were syphoned off to Western colonial countries.

Similarly, Mother Earth was originally able to host and benefit many members of her community that include human beings, land animals, water creatures and water sources, vegetation, land features, birds of the air and others (cf. Dube 2015:230). Global warming, desertification and growingly uninhabitable conditions of the earth are a result of anthropocentricism, which created a setting where members of the earth community cannot cherish and live harmoniously with each other. Postcolonial anthropocentricism held that humankind must prosper at all costs, especially through the exploitation of natural resources and industrialisation.

Conclusion

In contrast to a predominantly hostile environment against the people of Moab, the narrative of Ruth, told mostly from an Israelite setting, makes an apology for Moab. The author combats a Torah-induced mindset that perceived Moab as inferior, useless and even harmful to Israel. On the one hand, the Torah had warned that inter-marrying or mingling with Moabites would lead Israel to pagan religious practices, immorality and a forsaking of Yahweh. On the other hand, intermarriage with Ruth did not lead Boaz to apostasy or immorality. Ruth the Moabite did not present the traditional image of an incestuous and immoral bastard but of a virtuous woman – a woman fit to be counted among the great grandmothers of the Jewish Messiah. The apologetic perspective of the book of Ruth is an appeal to the imperialist minded Israelite to discard negative and false narratives in exchange for positive and true ones. A similar appeal is fitting on behalf of Mother Earth, Mother Africa and the local girl against stories that were manufactured by imperialism – stories that we do not know. Such stories said that Mother Earth naturally self-destructs, Mother Africa is a dark (shithole?) continent, and the indigenous African daughter is immoral whereas the coloniser's daughter is pure. Instead, the real true stories that we know are human-induced climate change, the colonialist's destruction of natural habitats in Africa and the two-thirds world, human trafficking, massacres, political med-

dling in African governments and the pollution of nature-loving cultures and religions. If the author of the book of Ruth could boldly confront oppressive interpretations of the Torah, we too must do the same against imperialist mindsets.

References

Joshua *Berman*, The End of the "Wars on the Cheap" for the United States. The Saker August 2017.

Christian *Brady*, The Conversion of Ruth in Targum Ruth. Review of Rabinic Judaism 2016 16 (2) 133-146.

Georg *Braulik*, The Book of Ruth as Intra-Biblical Critique on the Deuteronomic Law. Acta Theologica 1999 1 1-20.

Mishael *Caspi* & Rachel S. Havrelock, Women on the Biblical Road: Ruth, Naomi, and the Female Journey 1996.

Scott *Detrow*, From 'Brexit' To Trump, Nationalist Movements Gain Momentum around World, National Public Radio 2016 June 25.

Gerda *De Villiers* & Jurie Le Roux, The Book of Ruth in the Time of the Judges and Ruth the Moabitess. Verbum et Ecclesia 2016 37 (1).

Laura E. *Donaldson*, The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes. Research Gate.Net, 2008, *https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229538750*

Musa W. *Dube*, "And God Saw that It Was Very Good": An Earth-friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1. Black Theology, An International Journal 2015.

Robert *Fantina*, How the US Creates 'Sh*thole' Countries. Consortium News 2018 24 (324) Nov 20.

Rayna *Green*, The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture. The Massachusetts Review 1975 16 (4) 698-714.

Paul *Gregoire*, Crimes against humanity: the British Empire. Global Research 2017.

GW False, Global Warming is not Happening 2019, *www.mit.edu* .

Normal *Habel*, Ecology and Bible: Principles for Interpretation 2013, *www.normalhabel.com* .

Charles *Halton*, An Indecent Proposal: The Theological Core of the Book of Ruth. Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament 2012 26 (1) 30-43.

Polly *Higgins*, Seed-Idea: Seeding Intrinsic Values: How a Law of Ecocide Will Shift our Consciousness. Cadmus 2012 1 (5).

Bonnie *Honig*, Ruth, the Model Emigrée: Mourning and the Symbolic Politics of Immigration, in Athalya Brenner (ed), A Feminist Companion to Ruth: The Feminist Companion to the Bible. Sheffield: Sheffield Ac. Pr. 1993, 50-74.

Glenna *Jackson*, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah. The Bible Today 1994 March, 32.

Lee *Jones*, Societies under siege: Exploring how international economic sanctions (do not) work, Oxford University Press 2015.

Thomas *King*, Our Unprotected Heritage: Whitewashing the Destruction of Our Cultural and Natural Environment, London / New York: Routledge 2016.

Reuven C. (Rudolph) *Klein*, The Iniquities of Ammon and Moab. Jewish Bible Quarterly 2015 43 (2) 93-100.

Tod *Linafelt*, Narrative and Poetic Art in the Book of Ruth, Interpretation 2010 64 (2) 117-129.

Douglas *Lober*, Global Warming Debates, Facts and Statistics 2018 March, 27.

Mmadipoane (ngwan'a mphahlele), *Masenya*, Engaging with the book of Ruth as single, African Christian women: One African woman's reflection, Verbum et Ecclesia 2013 34 (1) 1-9. *http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v34i1.771.*

Sarojini *Nadar*, Stories are data with Soul – lessons from black feminist epistemology. *Agenda* 2014 28 (1) 18-28.

Felicia *Ramaribana*, Reading Ruth for the sake of poor rural women: A bosadi womanhood approach, Unpubl. Thesis, Pietermaritzburg: UKN 2012.

Monica *Rey*, Intersectionality in the Book of Ruth: Constructing Ruth's Identity in Ancient Israel. (Mag. Theol. Diss.), Boston University: Boston 2012.

Frederik *Schulze*, German Missionaries, Race, and Othering Entanglements and Comparisons between German Southwest Africa, Indonesia, and Brazil, Itinerario 2013 37 (1).

Landry *Signe*, Africa in Focus: Africa's tourism – A Global destination for investment and entrepreneurship. Brookings 2019 March 5.

Andre *Vitchek*, Imperialism Destabilising Africa 2013 *www.rt.com*.

Eli *Watkins* and Abby Phillip, Trump decries immigrants from 'shithole countries' coming to US, CNN 2018.

Lynn Jr. *White*, The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis, Science 1967 155 (3767) 1203-1207.

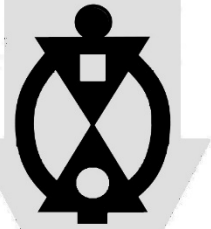
Sunny *Woan*, White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence. Washington & Lee Journal of Civil Rights & Social Justice 2008, 14 (2), 275-301.

Gale *Yee*, The Silenced Speak: Hannah, Mary and Global Poverty, Feminist Theology 2012 21 (1) 40-57.

Adinkra Symbols

- Ghana -

Cooperation & Interdependence



SECTION C

MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA AND ANCIENT JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL WORLDVIEW

VI. Woe to you, O Land, When Your King is a Child (Ecclesiastes 10:16-19):

A Dialogical Study between Qoheleth's Imagination of Ecology and Akan Proverbs

Mark S. Aidoo

Summary

African interpreters see culture as providing the social context in which meaning thrives. The lived experiences and thought-forms serve as vital hermeneutical tools. One of such cultural tools in African oral literature, communication, and interpretation is the use of proverbs. It is said that a person who knows proverbs reconciles with difficulties. This paper discusses how a contextual study of African proverbs sheds light on Qoheleth's imagination of ecological crisis. It aims at exploring ways in which Africans can be effective in the midst of ecological challenges. Qoheleth draws a link between ecological crisis, young people and bad leadership. In Ecclesiastes 10:16-19, the text says there will be curses on the land if young leaders are in control. Such a view has implication for the social structure in Africa and for that matter the religious community that seeks to empower young people. The question considered here is "in what ways can African views about leadership inform Qoheleth's characterisation of the ecological crisis?" What are the implications for leadership and the church in approaching ecological problems? Using a dialogical approach, the paper then proposes that the ecological crisis does not happen simply because all young leaders are irresponsible. It takes a person who is keen on building knowledge, listens to counsel and values self-identity to address ecological issues rightly.

Introduction

This paper highlights the challenges of identity in addressing the ecological crisis by examining the views in Ecclesiastes in relation to the Ghanaian Mfantse traditional leadership concept. It employs a dialog-

ical study using Mfantse proverbs to shed light on Qoheleth's imagination of leadership and ecological crisis in Ecclesiastes 10:16-19. There is a general view that everything rises and falls with leadership. How leadership approaches and manages the ecological crisis in Africa is a matter of concern. The paper proposes that authentic leaders are those who, irrespective of age and status, take time to develop themselves, nurture positive traits and desire to add value to the concept of leadership and the life of the people. The churches cannot be left out since they have a crucial role to play in addressing Africa's ecological crisis. The argument is that it is ironic to find most religious leaders in Africa ascending to "the throne" by virtue of being noble persons or sons of noble persons and yet do next to nothing while the land continues to suffer woe. Leaders who are not conscious of their self-identity bring woe to a nation. When such leaders are in control, "it is impossible for 'life in abundance' to be enjoyed by the majority in a global context where the global environment has been so degraded as to threaten the survival of the larger proportion of humankind, and where global inequality increases in inverse proportion year after year" (Mugambi 2016:1118). Does what is achieved matter when a youth is in leadership or when a person of noble birth is in leadership? How do the Mfantse people view a young person in leadership, and how can such observations inform Qoheleth's understanding of the causes of the ecological crisis?

The Mfantse are a sub-group of the Akans in Ghana. Akan refers to (1) a people group found in the southern part of Ghana, Cote D'Ivoire and Togo, and (2) a language spoken (Wiredu 1996:157; Yankah 1989:19,20). The Akan speaking people are the largest ethnic group in Ghana, forming about 47.5%, and the language is predominant and understood by many people across the country (GSS 2012:5). There are about 15 dialects in the Akan language group but Asante Twi, Akwapim Twi and Mfantse are the major dialects widely spoken, sharing similar vocabulary, thought forms and worldviews (Agyekum 2016:165).

The approach in this paper is a dialogue between Akan thought and Qoheleth, specifically by drawing lessons from Mfantse proverbs and relating them to what Qoheleth says. As in most African cultures, the Akan perceive a proverb as an indispensable yet aesthetic device that

is vital in speech. Agyekum (2005:9) defines proverbs as "inter-pretations of traditional wisdom based on experiences and the socio-political life of our elders." Proverbs season language; without them, the real power of the language is not felt. Proverbs lie deep in African oral tradition and display a people's wisdom and philosophy of life, that is why it is said *tsetsekaaso mu, ofi kakyere* (lit. preservation of culture comes from oral traditions). They serve as serve as analytic tools of thought and as the bedrock of philosophical reflections not only about the past but also about the future. When an issue comes up, proverbs become handy tools to bring out the meaning. Finnegan (2012:380) states that "in many African cultures, a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs." The meaning of a proverb is best seen in relevant contexts and intentions, bearing in mind the circumstances at stake (Yankah 1989:154,155). Through Akan proverbs we can learn how the people think.

African traditional ecological preservation is comprised of a wide range of understandings founded on community – human beings and nature in tandem. Africans believe in human responsibility for creation in a community, and not human-centredness in creation (MacKinnon 2007:339; Rolston 1988). That is why Mante (2004) advocates for theology to play a key role in discussions on ecology. To him, the non-human environment pervades all African symbolic thought and worldview. He sees a faulty protestant theological anthropology, which tends to separate human beings from nature and set the human being over and above nature, as not ideal for Africans. Mante then emphasises African traditions and thought-forms as an appropriate way to address ecological challenges. Awuah-Nyamekye (2014) also discusses the connection between traditional religio-cultural beliefs and practices as well as ecological problems in Ghana. He observes that in Ghana, conservation policies by political authorities often neglect the indigenous people's ecological knowledge or worldview. Although various literature has examined the relationship between religion and the environment, not much on indigenous traditional belief or indigenous traditional ecological knowledge has been highlighted.

What the traditional indigenous people have been taught, from generation to generation, needs to be taken into account (2014:16). Elsewhere, I argued for African Ecotheology as an effective approach to addressing ecological issues in Africa because it is a pragmatic approach that hinges on African identity, stewardship and African spirituality (Aidoo 2019:41-58). Ernst M. Conradie (2013:114-117) has also proposed an African hermeneutic for addressing the ecological crisis focusing on social change theory which embodies education, marketing, effective management, punishment, responsibility, prophetic warnings and speaking to people's desires, dreams and aspirations for the future. Earlier, Conradie (2009:3-18) had called for a theology of place that not only deals with geographic location and ethical concerns but also emphasises the presence of the triune God, "with a dialectic between cross and resurrection, with creation *and* redemption" (2009:5; emphasis original). Such an approach, to him, will be ideal for South Africa because of their experiences in politics, violence, justice, worship, access to land, health, mobility and patriarchal structures. In a similar vein, Ebenezer Blasu (2019:70-93) argues from the context of the Ewe in Ghana and proposes a Bible-based African theocology which can adequately motivate Christians towards ecological action. For him, the emphasis should be on African theology informing ecological studies. Others like Douglas Lawrie (2011:171-183) call for a creative kenosis in Africa that emphasises emptying oneself and serving the world using all fullness and strength to identify with the decay of creation.

In African religious traditions, Opoku (1978:52) explains how African ancestors used their own methods to preserve the environment. He believes that those traditional views about preservation of the natural environment are vital in contemporary times. It is an overstatement to say that African approaches to ecological challenges should differ from western approaches because western approaches are usually more philosophical and anthropocentric (Asamoah-Gyadu 2019:xi-xv; Dyke 2009:186-204; Conradie 2013:113-114). Africans have traditional religious practices that are essential in the preservation of the eco system. Yet these are constantly overlooked. In the view of Folarin (2013), some African leaders usually come into leadership by default including inheritance and election rigging. Their coming to power may be circumstantial. As such, they wait for crisis to set in before they seek

solutions because they have no pragmatic agenda, goals, or ambition, except to enjoy power. "What constitute achievements are rewarding efforts to the aspirant for getting there, the titular recognition, addition to or richness of his curriculum vitae, and of course, the spoils of office. The 'position' therefore is the focus of attention, not the results, the policies, actions and inactions" (2013:7). Ideally, leaders should be well prepared and set the agenda, goals and targets that are informed by a sound technical and knowledge basis, and leaders must serve and pursue their vision instead of thinking of the benefits that they can enjoy.

Youth, Leadership and Hope in Mfantse Thought

Akan traditional social structure generally follows an elaborate stratification system based on the recognition of hereditary status within the community. On each level is an advisory council where the central leader is supported by a group of leaders who exercise specialised political and administrative responsibilities. There are two main groupings: those who belong to the royal class, and those who do not. Royals are normally descendants of the ancestor who founded a land space or community; children as well as adults from that ancestor are included. In some cases, non-royals are adopted into royal families, though they have restricted privileges. The hierarchical arrangement, as in most ranked societies, gives recognition and honour to those who lead all the classes of people. Those who rule over the entire state have divisional chiefs heading subordinate regions, and then town chiefs, to sub-chiefs at the bottom of the administrative ladder. The royal is *odehye,* a compound word made up of *o* ('s/he') *de (*'to bear/hold/own') and *hye* ('boundary'). Hence, *odehye* connotes one who owns the boundaries of a land, traditions, customs. The *odehye* who occupies the stool is the one to be approached when it comes to ascertaining the limits of land, traditions and custom. This means, if a child is an *odehye,* that child can claim ownership to land and be responsible for its value. Non-royals, thus, have limited rights over land.

The Mfantse, a subgroup of the Akan, subscribe to matrilineal descent. When a leadership position becomes vacant or is likely to be vacant, there is little or no contestation, for it is only the queen-mother who has the prerogative to nominate a successor. The queen-mother can nominate her own biological child to be a chief – whether old or young. It is said that *panyin wō hō na wōwoo ōhen* (lit. the elders were there before the chief was born). That is to say, being an adult does not necessarily give one the right to leadership. A Mfantse saying goes, *yamu mba nnsa a, wommfa wōfase ndzi adze* (lit. when biological children have not taken their share, nephews cannot inherit). Hence, preference is given to those who are closer to the throne than those who are far from it. In contemporary times, royalty is sometimes conferred on those who are not within the royal lineage and are allowed to ascend a throne. Such persons must be those who can add some economic value to the throne. It is said *Esiakyer akyer se: 'Enyimnyam wōtō'* (lit. the ugly man from the town of Esiakyer says: 'reputation can be bought'). Hence, some people of non-noble status in society can buy their way into leadership even if they are not qualified by birth.

A child or young person could be given the throne to rule, but must prove to be worthy before being considered. Being a royal is not enough grounds for ascending a throne; one must be seen to be well-prepared physically, psychologically and spiritually. A nominee must be morally upright, whether an adult or a child. In Africa, children are not accorded participatory rights in public gatherings. A child is not supposed to be present actively when elders gather and must not intercept the conversations of elderly people. A child does not have the right to share his or her opinion to adults, and cannot talk back when an elder speaks (Ackah, 1998:86). However, the Mfantse believe that, *sē abofra hun ne nsa ho hohor a, ōnye mpanyimfo dzidzi* (lit. when a child knows how to wash his/her hands, s/he can eat with elders). Knowing how to wash hands implies being able to contribute meaningfully to society. Humility is one of the virtues associated with such a concept of maturity. It is said, *nyia orohwehwē ōhen edzi no, wōma odzi kan som* (lit. the one who wants to be a chief must first serve). Through humility and service, a person develops experience, and can be given some status and considered among elders. According to Kwame Gyekye (1996:87), "Systematic or progressive development of the child is what is appreciated and urged and can yield satisfactory

results. When a person reaches a certain stage in his development, he will be able and expected to act like an elderly person and to rub shoulders with the elderly in the society." Hence, a child or young person who shows signs of maturity in thinking and judgment can be qualified to be among the elderly or engage adults in all activities. Maturity, thus, is not only by age. A person could be advanced in age but not matured.

It is the experienced person who matters most in leadership. Experience is gained by staying close to adults and learning from them. However, confining oneself to one place is not enough. Hence, young people may be allowed to travel out of the home to gain more experience, but it is also believed that one who learns from home or from the old gains a better knowledge of the traditions. Even children who closely relate with adults usually learn a lot of wisdom. It is said, *akokōba a ōbēn ne na no na odzi abēbē ne srē* (lit. a chicken that is close to the mother eats the thigh of a grasshopper). In essence, a child or young person gets many privileges if s/he is close to the elders. That is why it is also said, *sē ēnye kōkōtse sian a, ēnnhwer woara* (lit. if you relate with the bush pig, you will not lose any of its nature).

It is assumed that children who want to aspire to be people of worth must have personal aspirations. Always listening from the streets will make one unworthy. A child must be interested in what goes on at home. Assimeng (2006:37) says, "Human beings are not born with aspirations. What to aspire for, and the efforts put in to gain the aspiration, are determined by the values of the social group in which one is immediately brought up." Unfortunately, contemporary features of socialisation make the children of noble people to be less rooted in traditional norms and home-making. These children spend all their time acquiring formal education to the detriment of traditional wisdom, communicative power and management of the home. They are brought up in homes where house-helps do everything for them while all that they do is concentrate on their formal education. Such alienation does not enable a person to fit well into society, but because of formal education and the status acquired from home, they easily advance to become leaders.

Leadership is not measured just by name and status. A person who cannot contribute meaningfully to society is considered to be *nyimpa hun* ("useless person"). The *nyimpa hun* is less than a child (Mfantse: *abofra*).[1] The *nyimpa hun* is ordinary, empty, and unfit to be counted upon. Conversely, a person of worth is described as *nyimpa tsitsir*, where *tsitsir* is a reduplicative adjective of *tsir* meaning "head". The assumption is that, *nyimpa tsitsir* connotes a head of a group, a dependable one or prominent person. That is to say, moral responsibility towards society is very key to the definition of a prominent person or a leader. To be a leader is to seek the wellbeing of the home or society. Gyekye states that,

> in African morality, there is an unrelenting preoccupation with human welfare. What is morally good is that which brings about – or is supposed, expected, or known to bring about – human wellbeing. This means, in a society that appreciates and thrives on harmonious social relationships, that what is morally good is what promotes social welfare, solidarity, and harmony in human relationships (1996:57).

Knowledge alone is not sufficient in leadership. A young person with good morals is likely to be successful than an adult with fewer morals. Hence, a status may be conferred on an individual with good morals as a "reward" for their efforts towards social wellbeing. Distinctions are made by virtue of the value of contributions a person makes to society; the lesser the contribution a person makes, the lesser the recognition given. Older people have the moral responsibility to add value to the life of young people. Notwithstanding, the Mfantse believe that *ōbra nyɛ woara abō* (lit. "life is how you make it"). Personal initiative is highly recognised. It is said: *Abofra a ōbōhwē ne ho yie wō hō a, obi nkyerē wo* (lit. If a child who will educate himself or herself well is there, no one will show you). Conversely, an adult who is not morally good cannot be entrusted with inheritance. The Mfantse say, *wosoma oba nyansafo; wonnsoma anamon tsentsen* (lit. it is the wise child who is sent; not the one with long legs). Wisdom and character, therefore, play a key role in defining status.

---

[1] In Asante Twi and Akwapim Twi, a baby who is crawling is called *abofra*, while a child or young person is *akodaa*. However, in Mfantse, *akodaa* is an aged man.

Although personal traits in leadership have been challenged by scholars, they still play an important role in determining good leadership (Yulk 2010:43-75; DuBrin 2013:69-104). Personal traits of leaders influence them to exhibit high motivation for excellence and a high concern for moral power to build on the needs and hopes of their followers. Hence, the capabilities of an individual are vital to the concept of leadership. Moreover, it is the responsibility of kingmakers and elders to see to it that the one approved to be heir to a throne is nurtured until that individual is adequately fit to lead. Some of the virtues that a traditional leader has to learn include traditional history, the significance of the kinship structure, communication, mediation, folk wisdom, customs and traditions (including taboos) such as how to pour a drink, how to put on a cloth, how to sit down, where to sit, how to dance, and what kinds of relationships one must encourage. A Mfantse proverb says, *kotoku a hwee nni mu, onntumi nngyina ho* (lit. an empty sack cannot stand upright). Hence, a young person needs to be well prepared to lead a community successfully. Since this proverb means the one with an empty pocket cannot stand, it also connotes that wealth plays a key role in shaping life.

The position of the chief is a spiritual one; it deifies the individual who sits on the stool. In this case, one's identity does not really matter; the stool makes the occupant an ordained person. The moment a person sits on the stool, the spirit of the ancestors come to rest on him/her. Hence, the personality, speech, language, and demeanor of the person change. The Mfantse says, *ōhen ba mpo, yentwa no powa* (lit. even the child of a chief cannot be insulted), and *ōhen sua dēn ara, obaakofo nnsoa no* (lit. no matter how small a chief is, an individual cannot carry the chief). Disrespecting the chief means disrespecting the ancestors. More so, the councillors must provide good advice to a chief. It is said that *yenni ōhen bōn, yē wō mpanyimfo bōn* (lit. there is no bad chief; rather there are bad councillors), and also *ōhen nya ahotrafo pa a nna ne ber yē dwoodwo* (lit. "if a king has good councillors, his reign is peaceful"). Hence, the advisors play a key role in the decisions of the chief. A chief who does not listen to the advice of the councillors will end up in disgrace, for *ōhen a onntsie ne mpanyimfo no, ōdze ne nantu bin kō bagua mu* (lit. a chief who does not listen to the elders will go to the public with faeces at the back of the heels).

Adu-Gyamfi (2012:264) explains that the chief plays the role of arbitrator by maintaining a court where he acts as the chief justice and members of his council sit as jurors. That is to say, good leadership rests not on the chief but more particularly on the councillors. From the above, it can be said that in Mfantse traditional set-up, the young and old can lead a people as long as there are good councillors. However, the Akan believe that, *asaase do yē hyew a, anamōn na ōka* (lit. if the earth is hot, the foot determines it), to show that being in constant touch with an issue will enable one to make the right judgments. It also gives the impression that experience is the best teacher.

The Ideal Leader in Ecclesiastes 10:16-18

Qoheleth's pessimism about life is brought to the fore when he focuses on the youth (*nā'ar*) and leadership. He says:

A Woe to you, O land, when your king is a youth (*nā'ar*),[2]
B and your princes feast in the morning;
A[1] Blessed are you, O land, when your king is a son of a nobleman (*ben chôrîm*),
B[1] and your princes feast at the proper time;
C for strength, and not for drunkenness"
(Eccl 10:16-17).[3]

From the arrangement of the text, A and B are contrasted with A[1] and B[1], while C enhances the meaning of A[1] and B[1]. That is to say, the youth is contrasted with the son of a nobleman because the latter knows the right time to feast. For Qoheleth, when the youth (*nā'ar*) is in leadership, the result will be ecological crisis – there is woe upon the land. Society faces misfortune, disillusionment and heartache if

[2] The NRSV, NIV translate *nā'ar* as "servant," while NKJV, ESV, ASV uses "child".

[3] All Translation are mine unless stated.

their leader is a youth. As a king himself (cf 1:1,12), Qoheleth does not see the possibility of a youth contributing anything meaningful to leadership. It is rather a son of the noblemen (*ben chôrîm*) who is successful in leadership, and will attract blessings on the land.

The Hebrew *nā'ar* ("youth") is also translated as a boy (Judg 8:20; Prov 22:15; Jer 1:6; Lam 2:21), a little child (1 Kgs 3:7; Hos 11:1), a young assistant (Ex 33:11), a helper (Gen 37:2), and a servant (1 Sam 2:13). Unlike the slave who is bonded in the power of another, the *nā'ar* is a free person who serves as a matter of choice. The term is used in hyponymous relation to *'ebed* ("servant"), that is "a male, subordinate helper often with the notion of personal attachment (a) in some contexts, the word has more the meaning of *steward*. (b) in military contexts, the word means a *soldier*" (Eng 2011:71,82; emphasis original). Thus, *nā'ar* could be a young man, a stage where he can be allowed to assume responsibility for military duty (cf 1 Sam 17:33), can be married (Prov 2:17; 5:18; Mal 2:14-15), or pay tax (Walton 1979:119; Eng 2011:53), but it could also refer to a child (Gen 8:21), or metaphorically as a stage of rebellion (Ps 25:7) and sin (Job 13:26).

In Ecclesiastes, the *nā'ar* is set in contrast to the *ben chôrîm* ("son of noble people"), that is those who were the freemen, born-frees, and nobles (see Jer 39:6; Neh 6:17; 13:17). The term *ben chôrîm* represents persons who exercise some form of authority and leadership, or play an important role in government. They were influential people who acquired their noble status by birth (Olivier & Aitken, 1997:255-256). Others attain nobility by merit. They are frequently mentioned alongside elders (1 Kgs 21:8, 11) and "officials, governors and heads of communities" (Neh 4:8,13; 5:7; 7:5; 12:40; 13:11).

The nobles of Israel and Judah were frequently chastised for contributing in bringing chaos to the land and were also made to suffer exile alongside the kings (Is 34:12; Jer 39:1-7; 52:1-11; Ezek 17:12; Dan 1:1-6 cf Job 34:18-19). However, Qoheleth seeks to say that, "the land is blessed with a ruler who belongs to nobility by birth and thus is not consumed by a passion to abuse newfound power the way a slave might do who assumes control over the highest office of the land (cf. Prov 30:22)" (Crenshaw 1987:176). Moreover, Crenshaw explains that:

> In ancient wisdom, poverty and youth were less desirable by far than maturity and kingship. Youth was vulnerable to sensual allurement, and poverty resulted (so the teaching went) from laziness. Age, by contrast, brought wisdom and honor, with kingship the ultimate reward for exemplary conduct. Of course, not every case of poverty and youth fitted the negative assessment, nor did every instance of kingship and age result in its opposite (1987:112).

Crenshaw is right because being born of noble birth does not guarantee wisdom and competence. A person of noble birth is not insulated from being consumed by passion. It stands to reason that Qoheheth was not necessarily comparing a young person with a noble but the inexperienced leader with one who is experienced. In Mfantse worldview, responsible and effective leadership is not about nobility. Knowing the duties to fulfil at the right time is a mark of leadership. Perhaps Qoheleth wants to say that immature leaders attract and nurture non-critical followers whose integrity can be questionable: the leader and councillors feast in the morning when they are expected to be working (v 16b). Such leaders are vulnerable because they are not well prepared to hold on to the values of society. Their agenda are unclear and vague because they follow their instincts rather than reason. When a leader does not know where s/he is leading the people to, there is disaster. Such leaders should rather be classified as immature leaders on the throne, and people who bring woe on the land.

The attitude of the young person or the son of a nobleman, according to Qoheleth, affects the land (*'ereṣ*; 10:16-17). The land either suffers woe or accrues blessings. The Hebrew word *'ereṣ*, usually translated "earth or "land," also refers to territory, country or underworld. Walter Brueggemann attests that land in the biblical sense usually refers to a physical space, but it is also symbolic, expressing "the wholeness of joy and well-being characterised by social coherence and personal ease in prosperity, security, and freedom" (1986:2). Pinker (2009:217) also observes that throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, *'ereṣ* is used to mean planet earth (1:4, 5:1, 8:14, 16); netherworld (3:21); country (5:9; 7:20, 10:16, 17, 11:2); and ground (10:7, 11:3, 12:7), with no clear preference of meaning. In this paper, I take *'ereṣ* "land" as synonymous with the ecology embodying the earth, water bodies and space. The well-being of the land or otherwise has repercussions on those who depend on it, which includes humanity, plants, animals and water

bodies. Among the Akan, land encompasses the image of a community, its people, plants, animals, and the environment. An ethic of land is also an ethic of the environment. In that respect, woe on the land connotes disaster for humanity and the environment. That is why the integrity of leadership matters.

Implications for Africans in Ecological Care

Ecology, here, is used interchangeably with environment. In African thought, the ecology is a creation of God, and is made up of all that make up the mother earth, sky and water bodies upon which humanity depends. The environment is not a creation of humanity. Human beings have been given the responsibility of stewardship. It is not to be domesticated for our intrinsic needs as some western people assume, putting the human being above creation and taking all to satisfy human need. For Africans, human beings are not above nature as life is dependent on the vital forces of nature. The environment has objective value in itself, and humanity must recognise such value and maintain it since the land and water bodies are all sacred. It is the lazy steward who is overtaken by events and allows the ecology to be destroyed, that is roof of the house (Heb: *bayith*) to sink in or leak (Eccl 10:18). Africans also have a similar concept of environment as a house, and in the sense Qoheleth uses "house" metaphorically as political dynasty (cf. 2 Sam 7:16). A person of character would not feast and get drunk when there are issues about a house to be addressed. Ecological crisis must not happen because leaders are thinking about themselves and feasting when there is work to do. Each person has a responsibility to care for the environment. Waiting for others to care for the environment should never be said of the African.

The key to effective leadership is strength and not drunkenness (v 16c). Elsewhere, Qoheleth consistently sees the youthful stage as unstable and lacking strength. It is a quickly passing stage which should rather be celebrated with responsible enjoyment – "Young people, it's wonderful to be young! Enjoy every minute of it. Do everything you

want to do; take it all in" (Eccl 11:9a; ASB). The young person must refuse to worry because that would affect the body health (11:10). This is like saying, one step at a time. Allowing tomorrow to think of itself is a sure way to concentrate on the now. Nevertheless, all that the young person does will be brought before the judgment of God (11:9b). Ironically, Qoheleth says that the value of feasting is for strength (10:17c), for laughter (10:19a), to gladden life (10:19b), and not necessarily to result in drunkenness (10:17c). Effective leadership is not about status – whether one is a servant or not. Qoheleth earlier observed the subversion of social structure where nobles rather become followers of the youth and said it was unacceptable. It is evil and a great error for a fool to be set on a throne while the rich sit at a low place, or a slave to rule while princes become followers (10:5-9). This error is not self-inflicted, because everyone gets what s/he deserves. The one who digs a pit will fall into it (Eccl 10:8 cf. Prov 26:27). For the Mfantse, categorising every young person as unstable, lacking strength and prone to drunkenness is not acceptable. Effective leadership is not about age or being a servant but about wisdom, knowledge, and morality. That is why Africans involve the young people in the care and maintenance of the environment

In Africa, it is the one who knows how to do something that is given the task. That is why the Mfantse look at leadership differently from what we find in Ecclesiastes. It seems Qoheleth is talking about political structures where everything falls on the political leader. It is as if the councillors are there to feast in the morning when the king tells them so. The youth or servant analogy in this pericope also connotes an inexperienced person who totally neglects political responsibility and allows the deputies to do what they want (Wright 1991:1187). In African thought, the chief and the councillors are all responsible to the ancestors whom Mbiti refers to as the invincible police (Mbiti 1970:82), but the utmost responsibility lies with the chief. But when the chief makes an inappropriate speech or action, it is the duty of the councillors, especially the *okyeame* to interpret what the chief said in the right way (see Aidoo 2018:104-5).[4] The Akan believes that *sē ōhen*

[4] The *Okyeame* is one of the elders/councillors who speaks for the chief, but not a chief.

annko a, akoa guan (lit. if the chief does not fight, the servants run away). Nevertheless, Akan traditional leadership is also a shared concept. If good leadership is what is at stake, then it is not all about a youth/servant vis-à-vis a noble person. Again, *ōhen nya mpanyimfo papa a, nna ōse "menyim amanbu"* (lit. when a chief has good councillors, he says "I know how to reign"). This means, the responsibility for good governance also lies on the councillors. Ideal leadership is about surrounding oneself with persons of worth (*nyimpa tsitsir*) rather than useless persons (*nyimpa hun*) for, *panyin ntsena hō ma asafua mmfō* (lit. an elder does not sit unconcerned while the room gets wet). A good leader is one who is surrounded by good advisors.

Experience and knowledge are key in leadership when it comes to managing the ecology and not status. Hence it is said that, *asombēn wōhēn no nyia n'ano awo* (lit. only a talented person can blow the royal ivory horn). Experience and knowledge, therefore, would make leadership tilt on the adult against the young person. For it is said that *abofra bo nwaba, na onyē akyekyerē* (lit. a child can swallow a snail, but not a tortoise) and *dorbēn pae abofra nsa mu, na ompaa mpanyin nsa mu* (lit. the tapping reed breaks in children's hands, but not in the hands of elders). These proverbs, among others, show the indispensability of adults. On the other hand, there seems to be an impression that the Mfantse see young people as more innovative and smarter. It is said: *ōhen akokora na wosisi no na nyē ababun* (lit. "A chief who is very old is the one who can be cheated and not the young one"). It is the young leader who has all the strength to repair a sinking roof and a leaking house. Perhaps, the old leader will rely on the proverb that "money answers everything" (10:19).

The youth in Africa cannot be overlooked in caring for the environment. In the Old Testament, some young kings were very successful. Josiah was eight years old when he began to rule over the land and was considered to be successful (1 Kgs 22:1-2; 2 Chron 24:2). The moral declension that characterised Israel and Judah also prompted the prophet to declare that God will cause young people and babies to rule instead of "warriors and soldiers, judge and prophet, diviner and elder, captain of fifty and dignitary, counsellor and skilful magician and expert charmer" (Isa 3:1-5). The leaders at that time were accused of misleading the people, using bad speech (Isa 3:8), and bringing

woe to the land by devouring the vineyard (Isa 3:14). Actually, the nobles were also to blame, and were heavily chastised by the prophets. Paul, in the New Testament, admonished Timothy that he should conduct himself well while leading the people of God, and teach so that no one despises him for being a youth (1 Tim 4:12).

In Africa, some organisations are using the youth to address ecological issues. The African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) is partnering with young people for conservation-friendly innovation and entrepreneurship to achieve its mission of wildlife and wildlands thriving. They are empowering the youth to take leadership and ownership of the challenges in the environment. The African Youth Initiative on Climate Change (AYICC) is another organisation that brings together youth organisations in Africa working on climate change under one umbrella to proactively get involved in the decision making process and the adoption of sustainable options towards a better climate and social equity. They see the youth as future leaders. Since the contemporary leaders are failing to give the best solutions to climate change, they have taken it upon themselves to redeem Africa from this predicament by falling on the youth. These examples show that African youth are capable of contributing meaningfully to ecological development.

Implications for the African Church

When Lynn White (1967:1203-7) accused Christianity to be the root cause of the world's environmental problems and that Christianity must bear a huge burden of guilt, one would have thought that decisive interventions would be made by the church. Yet very little has been done by the church in Ghana. In a recent study by Osei-Owusu (2018:156-210), it was found out that in the mainline churches, leaders have a wealth of theological resources about the preservation of the environment but there is very little awareness among the members of the church in the local communities. Only the Catholic Church in Ghana has embarked on a comprehensive education among the members and even that there is little to show. In 2018, eight Methodist ministers posted on their Facebook how rains have de-

stroyed their chapel buildings. A few lamented on how floods are affecting them on the church compounds. Ironically, they are all looking up to the political leaders to take action. The church must take advantage of wisdom, "to resolve ethical dilemmas, encourage economically productive lifestyles, build community and deepen the reader's (or hearer's) understanding of reality" (Bratton 2003:257).

The reasons why the church has done very little on care for the ecology is that it is looking up to others, especially the governments, to do everything about maintaining the environment. There is also an impression that stewardship is always about money and not the lands the churches own. It also pays very little attention to building the capacity of its members in terms of ecological care. To say that there is a general need for leaders in society, government, institutions, business and church is an overstatement. The African church has never been short of leaders – bishops, apostles, pastors, prophets, miracle workers, and evangelists. It is short of leaders who know what to do. Hence, the roof of the house is sinking in and leaking, and that is why "the people wander like sheep" (Zech. 10.2). In fact, a shortage of good leaders creates a shortage of good followers, and a shortage of good followers produces a shortage of future good leaders. Perhaps, the church has lost a vital force – wisdom – that makes ministry toward life in abundance become complete, and is not developing effective leaders. For the church to be of relevance in terms of ecological crisis, it does not need more pastors, but persons of wisdom, character and integrity. It does not need more sons and daughters of priests or persons of noble birth to take over from the parents. Effective leadership is about wise men and women adequately trained in a cultural ethos and value self-identity in community. It is not about the aged, nobles, young people or servants, but people with values, credibility, vision and respect for traditions. Persons who are well prepared and knowledgeable can take good care of God's land, of which we are stewards.

What more can the African church do? First, the church must teach that all Christians are sons of a nobleman because it is through the blood of Jesus that all have become joint heirs of the kingdom of God. Christians are "children of God" (Jn 1:12-13) and "royals" (1 Pet 2:9),

and thus nobles. African Christians can enjoy better recognition as "nobles" when they appeal to traditional knowledge and potentials to add value to the throne. Ironically, if only nobles are the ones who make the difference and bring blessings on the land, then the church is yet to see such nobles who do what is right and hold fast to wisdom (Prov 8:15-16).

Second, effective leadership has more to do with what one contributes to society. Leadership is a platform where the leader, followers and situation dynamically influence the other. This means that leadership is a dynamic process where the agents of production influence each other's actions toward achieving a particular goal. A leader's personal qualities or the demonstration of extraordinary insight of a situation can inspire loyalty and obedience from followers, whereas the wits and counsel of followers can inspire transformation in the leader and a situation. The call for the youth in Africa to develop their capabilities to be persons of worth and translate their strength into productive ways for the betterment of society is apt.

Third, the church must teach all to accept that the spirituality attached to traditional and religious leadership is something to be honoured. The chief is ordained and has the support of ancestors and elders. Everyone has a role to play in managing the land. God can raise followers to initiate a movement that can transform the situation to the benefit of all (Aidoo 2017:365-367). Being proud of status is wrong. Emphasis on titles is not helpful. Leadership is not merely the ability to influence, incite and excite followers. It also includes harmony with the spiritual world and with the people around, as well as the ability to listen and the willingness to be led. When others provide guidance to functional leaders, it does not reduce the status of the leader. It rather enhances the leader's spirituality. Inspirational motivation being a quality of leaders requires the empowerment of the followers to initiate actions. The ability to inspire and motivate oneself to perform at high levels, and to be committed to organisational initiatives makes the leader credible.

Fourth, the church must teach its members to be humble so that they could learn to grow in knowledge and wisdom. Although wisdom has its limitations and inadequacies, the one who ascends a throne with little wisdom only to drink and feast causes great harm to the land.

Incompetence brings lots of setbacks to the progress of a nation and its people, including the ecology. The knowledgeable person celebrates life as it comes, and feasts at the proper time (Eccl 10:17). There are instances where the king can be a fool, so a constant liaison with advisors is necessary: "Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice" (Eccl 4:13; ESV). The absurdity and unpredictability of life requires an experienced person, but more so, those with wisdom to navigate successfully.

Lastly, the church in Ghana, and Africa in general, has to admit young people into leadership, otherwise it will fail. Perhaps the church sees the young people as lazy, spending all their time in feasting. When young people are given leadership, they should not be overtaken by the moments of enjoyment as if that is the most important thing in life. If adults and nobles are not living up to expectation, then the young people must brace themselves to make a difference. The Akan say, *abofra nkotu mbire a wonnhu tu; mpanyin so nkotu a, woetsiatsia do* (lit. when a child is sent to pick mushrooms, he cannot do it well; when an adult is sent, he steps on it). After all, "it is for a man to bear the yoke while he is young" (Lam 3:27).

Conclusion

This paper has discussed Qoheleth's views about the cause of ecological crisis through dialoguing with Mfantse proverbs. It has examined the role of the young person in leadership as compared to people of noble birth. For Qoheleth, there is woe on the land when young people or servants reign because they sit unconcerned when things go bad, bringing calamity on the land. Nobles rather use their strength to avert the ecological crisis. From the Mfantse context, however, responsible leadership is not about being a young person or a son of a noble person. Anyone who pursues knowledge and wisdom and possess good morals can be successful in leadership and will not sit unconcerned in the midst of the ecological crisis.

Chieftaincy in Mfantse thought belongs to the royal adults and young people who by blood ties belong to the royal family and are well prepared to lead. In contemporary times, non-nobles have worked their way to the throne by their wealth and power. So being a royal is not enough ground for ascending a throne. The potential leader must be worthy, dependable, competent, assertive and morally upright, and must contribute meaningfully to society. Young people can be allowed to ascend the throne when they have adequately prepared themselves to act with wisdom. In Africa, leadership is a shared concept that rests not only on the chief but more so on the councillors. As such, there must be a healthy interaction and balance between personal contributions and leadership competences, and between the chief and the councillors, although the buck stops with the chief.

For some positive impact to be made against the ecological crisis, five proposals have been made for the leadership of the church and society. Everything should not be left in the hands of nobles who lead yet the ecological crisis keeps worsening. The church must help to develop authentic leaders who take time to increase their knowledge, nurture positive qualities and are ready to add value to the system as well as the life of the people. It is character and integrity that guarantees success in leadership. Young people who are worthy and sit under the feet of traditional authority to develop their minds and strive for harmonious relationships are people of worth who can be successful leaders. Moreover, those who surround leaders must be people of worth, ready to do the right thing at the right time.

References

Christian *Ackah*, Akan Ethics: A Study of the Moral Ideas and the Moral Behaviour of the Akan Tribes of Ghana, Accra: Ghana University Press, 1998.

Yaw *Adu-Gyamfi*, The Role of the Chief in Asante Society, in: Michael D. Palmer and Stanley M. Burgess (Eds) The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice, 1st edition, Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2012, 256-267.

Kofi *Agyekum*, An Akan oral artist: The use of proverbs in the lyrics of Kwabena Konadu, in: Research Review NS, 21.1 (2005) 1–17.

_____, The sociocultural concept of "ohia", poverty in Akan: Konadu's "ennee meko na maba", in: South African Journal of African Languages 36.2 (2016) 163-171.

Mark S. *Aidoo*, Empowering Followership in the Politics of Workplace Spiritual Leadership, in: Expository Times 128.8 (2017) 365-375.

_____, My Words Dropped Upon Them Like Dew": Towards Reimaging the Identity of African Biblical Interpreters, in: Johanna Stiebert/ Musa W. Dube (Eds), The Bible, Centres and Margins: Dialogue between Postcolonial African and British Biblical Scholars, London: T & T Clark 2018, 97-113.

_____, Towards an Agenda for Ecotheology in African Theological Studies, in: Benjamin Abotchie Ntreh, Mark S. Aidoo and Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh (Eds), Essays on the Land, Ecotheology and Traditions in Africa, Eugene: Wipf & Stock 2019, 41-58.

J. Kwabena *Asamoah-Gyadu*, Foreword – The Earth is the Lord's: Mainstreaming Ecological Issues in African Theology, in: Benjamin Abotchie Ntreh, Mark S. Aidoo and Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh (Eds), Essays on The Land, Ecotheology and Traditions in Africa, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019, xi-xx.

Max *Assimeng*, Understanding Society: An Introduction to Sociology for African Students, Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 2006.

Samuel *Awuah-Nyamekye*, Managing the Environmental Crisis in Ghana: The Role of African Traditional Religion and Culture with special reference to the Berekum Traditional Area, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2014.

Ebenezer Yaw *Blasu*, The Bible and Caring for the Land: African Theocology as Christian Impulsion for Creation Care, in: Benjamin Abotchie Ntreh, Mark S. Aidoo and Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh (Eds), Essays on The Land, Ecotheology and Traditions in Africa, Eugene: Wipf & Stock 2019, 70-93.

Susan Power *Bratton*, The Precautionary Principle and the book of Proverbs: Toward an Ethic of Ecological Prudence in Ocean Management, in: Worldviews 7.3 (2003) 253-273.

Walter *Brueggemann*, The Land (OBT), Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

Ernst M. *Conradie*, Contemporary Challenges to Christian Ecotheology: Some Reflection on the State of the Debate after Five decades, in: Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 147 (November 2013) 106-123.

_____, Towards a Theology of Place in the South African Context: Some Reflections from the Perspective of Ecotheology, in: Religion and Theology 16 (2009) 3-18.

James L. *Crenshaw*, Ecclesiastes (OTL), Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1987.

Andrew *DuBrin*, Principles of Leadership, 7th Edition, London: South Western, Cengage Learning 2013.

Milton *Eng*, The Days of our Years: A Lexical Semantic Study of the Life Cycle in Biblical Studies (LHB/OTS 464), New York: T &T Clark 2011.

Ruth *Finnegan*, Oral Literature in Africa, 2nd Edition, Cambridge: Open Book Publishers 2012.

Sheriff *Folarin*, Africa's leadership challenges in the 21st century: A Nigerian perspective, in:

African Journal of Political Science and International Relations 7.1 (April 2013) 1-11.

GSS, Ghana Statistical Services, 2000 Population and Housing Census, Accra: Statistical Service 2012.

Kwame *Gyekye*, African Cultural Values: An Introduction. Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company 1996.

Daniel *Lawrie*, The Environment as Promise and Problem in the Old Testament, in: Scriptura 107 (2011) 171-183.

Barbara *MacKinnon*, Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues, 5th edition, Belmont, California: Thomson/ Wadsworth 2007.

J.O.Y. *Mante*, Africa Theological and Philosophical Roots of our Ecological Crisis, Accra: Son Life Press 2004.

John *Mbiti*, African Religions and Philosophy, London: Heinemann 1970.

Jesse N. K. *Mugambi*, Climate Change and Food Security: A Challenge for African Christianity, in: Isabel Apawo Phiri/ Dietrich Werner/ Chammah Kaunda/ Kennedy Owino (Eds.), Anthology of African Christianity (Regnum Studies in Global Christianity), Oxford: Regnum Books 2016, 1117-1132.

J. P. J. *Olivier* & Kenneth T. *Aitken*, nā'ar in: Willem A. VanGemenren (Gen. Ed.), New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis 3, Carlislie: Paternoster Press 1997, 255-256.

Kofi *Opoku*, Tradition as a Way to the Future: An African Perspective, in: Trinity Journal of Church and Theology 5.2 (1978) 52-53.

Bonsu *Osei-Owusu*, Salvaging our Environment: Responses of Selected Churches in Ghana. PhD Thesis, Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon 2018.

Aron *Pinker*, An Advantage of a Country in Ecclesiastes 5:8, in: Jewish Bible Quarterly 37.4 (2009) 211-223.

Holmes *Rolston*, Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World, Indiana: Temple University Press 1988.

Peter *Van Dyk*, Challenges for Ecotheology, in: Old Testament Essays 22.1 (2009) 186-204.

John *Walton*, *nā'ar* in: Willem A. Van Gemenren (Gen. Ed.), New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis 2, Carlislie: Paternoster Press 1997, 118-120.

Lynn *White*, Jr., The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis, in: Science 155 (1967) 1203–1207.

Kwesi *Wiredu*, Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective, Indiana: Indiana University Press 1996.

J. Stratford *Wright*, Ecclesiastes, in: Frank E. Gaebelein (ed.), Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Song, 5 (EBC), Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1991, 1137-1197.

Kwesi *Yankah*, The Proverbs in the Context of Akan Rhetoric: A Theory of Proverb Praxis, New York: Peter Lang 1989.

Gary *Yulk*, Leadership in Organisations, 7th Edition, Upper Saddle River: Pearson 2010.

VII. Towards a Setswana Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics:

The Example of Genesis 8:20-9:17

Kenosi Molato & Musa W. Dube

Abstract

The paper explores Setswana and biblical moral teachings on the environment as well as their functions in the preservation of the Earth, demonstrating with the text of Genesis 8:20-9:17. It also explores how contemporary profit-oriented relationships with the Earth constitute moral degeneration. Lastly, the chapter explores how some Setswana perspectives on the environment can constitute Earth friendly ways of reading the Bible for the revitalisation of the Earth community as a whole.

Introduction

The Botswana national anthem's first stanza starts off by asserting that "*Fatshe leno la rona, ke mpho ya Modimo, ke boswa jwa borraetsho...*" which translates to, "Our land is a gift from God, an inheritance from our forbearers." Undergirding this statement is the recognition from the Batswana founders that their land was given to them by the deity *Modimo* (God). Therefore, the song encapsulates a theology of the environment. It also summons all Batswana to understand and recognise that God is the giver of the land. Recognising the land as a sacred gift has implications for both the land and the recipients of such a gift. In this paper, we assume that by singing, "Botswana is a sacred gift from God", we recognise that the land must remain sacred, and that this must be attested to by our ways of living and of using the land. Though this is the case, there has been a decreasing awareness

among the Batswana that they are called to take care of their environment**.** The question then is, do we ponder on the words of this song and what they entail?

I (Kenosi), having grown up in the beautiful Okavango and Maun, recall the great river Thamalakane, which runs across the town and divides it into two; and the water reeds that beautify the riverbank in which Maun was named after. As at now, Maun remains a shadow of its former self. The water from the river, which we used for our daily sustenance, is no longer drinkable because it is polluted by us the members of the community. Musa Dube (2015:230) vocalised this eco-injustice when she states that humanity has failed to recognise that in the creation Biblical narrative, people are depicted as the children of the earth. She (2015:230) writes, "The human beings are told to keep the Earth Community just as good as God created it. Nonetheless, today's audience cannot watch the biblical drama of creation as an innocent spectator because the Earth is facing an environmental crisis from human exploitation".

This paper argues that at the core of human moral degradation is humanity's failure to recognise the sanctity of the environment. And thus lead to humanity to forget who they are and their responsibility concerning the environment. In Botswana, citizens have increasingly become detached from the values of environmental ethics that are embedded in Setswana traditions and customs. This results in environmental degradation. One of the factors, which led to environmental degradation, is the failure of humanity to remember the Earth as the core member of our community. It is to be noted that the Setswana ecological traditions demonstrate that the Batswana viewed nature as sacred and since they identified themselves with nature. This paper seeks to propose a Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics in reading Genesis 8:20-9:17 in order to address the issue of environmental degradation in Botswana.

Definition of environmental degradation

Swati Tiyagi, Neelam Girga and Rajan Paudel (2014:1491) describe environmental degradation as the deterioration of the environment through depletion of natural resources such as air, water and soil, the destruction of the ecosystem and the extinction of wildlife. They continue to explain environmental degradation as any change or disturbance to the environment perceived to be deleterious or undesirable (2014:1491). This is to say that at the core of environmental degradation, is failure to recognise environmental value, resulting in the now observable behavior of using nature primarily for human benefit, consumption and endless quest for accumulation of profits.

There are close to three phases of environmental degradation awareness that have developed and unfolded over the past 58 years in the global stage (Conradie 2005). The first phase raised concerns about the chemicals used in the agricultural setting in US and Britain (cf. Oosthoek & Gills 2005). Rachael Carson published the *Silent Spring* in 1962 in order to address this issue. Consequently; DDT was banned from Britain and other countries in the middle of the 1960s (cf. Oosthoek & Gills 2005). The second phase raised a concern about population growth and economic development in the late 1960s. There was a plethora of publications addressing this issue such as: *Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlinch, *Unsafe at any Speed* by Ralph Nader, *The death of Nature: Women, Ecology and Scientific Revolution* by Carolyn Merchant, and many others. The third phase of the environmental crisis awareness came in the late 1980s when scientist discovered serious signs of the ecological crisis, which suggested that humanity was destroying the environment on a global scale. The first of these signs showed the thinning of the Ozone layer, and the second was global warming (cf. Oosthoek & Gills 2005).

Human behavior is the main cause of environmental degradation. Conradie argues that when Human species lose their sense of right and wrong, it does not only affect their society but also the environment, making the Earth not to be a pleasant place to reside in (2005:183). Gabriel Setiloane (1985:40) notes that in Sotho Tswana

worldview, "*Motho* is part of Nature and Nature is *Motho's* companion from the beginning. Nature is therefore not an object for human exploitation, for like humanity, it came out from the same Source." In this theological understanding, human beings do not possess supreme power or rights over nature but are interconnected with nature. This worldview does not only bring the interconnectedness between the people and the environment, but also underlines the need for a relationship of liberating interdependence.

Globalisation & Industrialisation

The causes of the environmental degradation have been debated for decades now. In these debates the following factors come to the surface as the main causes or contributors to environmental degradation: technological developments; rapidly increasing human population; dramatic increases in resource and energy consumption; the emergence and development of the capitalist world economy and lastly; utilitarian attitudes towards the environment (cf. Belal, Cooper & Khan 2015:44). At the centre of these causes is the issue of Humanbeings rapaciousness placed in the context of globalisation. Globalisation entails an interrelationship between countries, companies and individuals (cf. Eisenhardt 2002:88). The concept of globalisation refers to neoliberal economic policy that underlines the generation of profit across boundaries to the point where ethics are subjugated to profit-making. People and environmental welfare are sacrificed for profit. (cf. Belal, Cooper & Khan 2015:44). The key players in the globalisation concept are multinational corporations that seek cheap labor to maximise profit and which lack long-term commitment to their workers, communities and the environment.

Human beings think, imagine and invent. This they do in order to develop their surroundings. Some have argued that the human thinking capacity and the reasoning is what distinguishes them from their

surroundings.[1] Midn Frouel writes, "They create systems, devices and technologies that are more and more complex, that are quicker and quicker, and that are more and more ingenious. For several years, the process of modernism has been accelerating, seemingly impeded by nothing" (2019:1). Developments affect our daily lives such as religion and how we view our environment but, the problem is the development of the community through mining, chemical industries and forms of transport that release pollutants into the atmosphere, among many others. These human developments are failing to fathom the significance of the environment within the community structure. This depletes the ozone layer, destroys trees and vegetation and encumbers animal movement.

This is partly because humanity has not fully grasped the sacrament of the environment, although this is beginning to change since the last two decades. The sacrament of environment is crucial as we consider the impact of developments in the society because many views the environment as a mechanical concept rather than sacramental. John Chryssavgis (2006:93) argues that since humanity has failed to see the sacrament of creation, they arrogantly subject everything to their individualistic desires. The developments that do not consider these aspects end up lacking the sensitivity or disturbing the established relationship between humanity and nature.

At the heart of environmental moral degeneration is the contemporary profit-oriented attitude of human beings who use the natural resources for gain and profit rather than coming with the strategies of preserving nature. Moreover, this attitude develops a buyer and seller mentality. This consumer oriented implies that human beings use natural resources without minding that these natural resources will be depleted. Consequently, this mentality puts too much burden on

[1] However, our Tswana legendary stories, which we were taught while sitting around the fire at night, shows that Hare was the most intelligent animal in the animal kingdom.

the environment in the sense that consumerism is central to the economy of the country. Countries use their natural resources to boost their economy. Sallie Mcfague (2013:8) encapsulates this idea when she argues, "the "culture of consumerism" is not just a form of life that we can accept or reject; it has now become like the air we breathe. This is the "nature" of "culture"—culture becomes nature; it becomes "natural." It should be noted that the reorientation of profit-making attitude towards natural resources is pivotal for environmental regeneration. If human beings do not change the way they view and use natural resources, then environmental degradation will neither be avoided nor reduced.

Setswana Perspectives on the Environment

The global environmental crisis has shown the shortcomings of the scientific approach that is developed from the western economic paradigm in trying to solve the environmental crisis (cf. Bernard 2001:33; Masondo 2014:115). Therefore, it is important to revisit the indigenous knowledge system that was utilised by native people in preserving the environment (cf. Bernard 2001:33; Chanda 1996:65). Penny Bernard (2001:33) argues that the colonisation of African countries has led many cultures to jettison their indigenous ecological knowledge thereby causing environmental crisis in their countries, which never before transpired because of the sensitivity with which native people perceived their environment. Indigenous ecological knowledge is different from book learning but is primarily rooted in the accumulation of personal experiences, which is derived from indigenous communities' ways of preserving the environment.

For example, traditional dancing in Botswana is not mere entertainment but has cultural significance, especially in relation to agricultural rites and wildlife celebrations. It is in instances like these that Batswana show how important nature is to their livelihood. Dances are sometimes performed in rain making ceremonies. One of the dances, which is performed mostly in Maphoka village, is *Maele*. This dance is performed by women around the month of September to ask the ancestors for rain at the beginning of the rainy season. Another

dance, which is primarily associated with the environment, is *Ndazula*. This dance is usually performed to thank the ancestors for a good harvest. It is accompanied by beer drinking. Ceremonies that are connected with the rain making such as the ones mentioned above are considered important in Setswana worldview because it is in the pouring of rains, ploughing and harvest time that the consciousness of the value of the Earth and its importance is heightened. If the environment is not kind to the Sotho-Tswana people, so they appease it through rituals such as rain making dances and sacrificing of sacred animals, which are kept for the ritual events (cf. Masondo 2008:85).

In Botswana, people observe the agricultural rites such as *letsema* (To start ploughing the field), *Molomo* (the tasting of the first fruits) and *dikgafela* (Thanksgiving festival for rain after harvest) (cf. Nkomazana 2010:123). Moses Maruping argues, "Dikgafela is a traditional harvest festival meant to appease the skies or ancestors (*badimo*) to release the rains well in time before the looming ploughing season beckons." In this celebration the women would prepare beer, which would be used during the day of the celebration, and during the celebration the beer would be given to the chief who then would take a sip and pour the beer on the ground. The reasons for performing this act has various interpretations but one of the interpretations is that the chief recognises the covenant which they have with the Earth, by doing so, the Chief acknowledges the interconnectedness between the Earth which has been given to them by God. The second interpretation is that the chief venerates the ancestors who have given them rain; therefore, they deserve to have the first fruit from their land. By pouring the beer on the Earth the Chief acknowledges that the ancestors are part and parcel of the Earth.

Seasonal observance is one of the practices under Setswana indigenous ecological knowledge. Bongani Gumbo points out that people who lived in the Okavango delta were aware of the dangers of environmental degradation and therefore they avoided it by diversifying their fishing and hunting strategies. Thus, the Riverine people of the Okavango delta in the Northwestern area of Botswana had fishing seasons and hunting seasons. By doing this, they allowed the seasons of

reproduction a cycle that was not to be interrupted (cf. Gumbo 2014:90-91). Therefore, the ecological indigenous knowledge in the Okavango delta was instrumental in preserving the deltas from the environmental crisis. Similarly, Masondo points out, "Depletion of fur animals was prevented by prohibiting their hunting during summer when they were breeding in the Sotho-Tswana culture" (2014:132). By doing this the animal reproduction season was not tempered with, which allowed the animals to multiply.

Olaotswe Kgosikoma, Witness Mojeremane and Barbra Harvie (2012:27) state that indigenous farmers in Botswana are accustomed to the eco system in their environment so much that they can notice some trends in vegetation change in response to climate changes and also the causes of environmental degradation in their environment and the actions that can be taken in order to prevent it. It is important to note how indigenous people can perceive the different land conditions since they know their environment as compared to relying on scientific studies (cf. Kgosikoma, Mojeremane & Harvie 2012:27). Indigenous farmers can predict how the next season will turn out by observing the appearance or absence of certain small plants, the normal or abnormal behavior of some animals, and certain movements of the moon and the sun.

Mythic animals provided in Setswana worldview foster a strong attachment to the conservation of the environment. Maserole Kgari Masondo argues that Mythic animals need to be decolonised for they provide a historical narrative of Sotho-Tswana culture and what it means to be human. It is in mythic animal narrative that the identities of the tribes are depicted and their value and identity (*seriti*) displayed. Willoughby (1909:263) notes that the mythic animals hold "an African in awe of unseen powers, and cast their halo around the sanctity of tribal morality". Interwoven in this mythic animal narrative are the moral values which hold the fabric of the society, and this means that when these narratives are lost, the society degenerates. When the society degenerates, the environment too will degenerate because of the interconnectedness between human species and the environment. Masondo (2014:125) writes:

> "Mythic animals deal primarily with the origin of people and certain social and ritual institutions that account for real-life situations and explain the basic conditions of human life as perceived by their authors. They humanise people by giving them identity and animalise humanity by drawing them back to their roots; their history of origin-environment."

Jacob Olupona (2006:261) points out that the environment and nature are intertwined in African culture to such an extent that some beliefs and cosmological concepts are derived from them. This is to say that the environment and nature in an African cosmology play a huge role in establishing the laws and norms of the society. Growing up in the Okavango, I recall this intertwined relation between animals and human beings depicted by some of the narratives of my own culture (*Setawana*). There was a big ox in my grandfather's kraal which he called "his father." We were prohibited to slaughter this ox or hit it. My grandfather said that this ox "*Ke motheo wa lesaka,*" meaning that it was the foundation of the kraal, and if it died, all the cattle would disappear. This demonstrates the interconnectedness between nature and humanity. The rituals of the family were performed upon this Ox and therefore, when one tampers with it, s/he tempers with the livelihood of the family and the foundations that held the family together.

This narrative exemplifies the interconnection and interdependence of human beings and the environment that exist in Setswana worldview. At the centre of this cosmology is an understanding that the environment is a core member of our community. It highlights that we, human beings, are interconnected with all other members of the Earth community. The killing of other member of the Earth community is therefore also the killing of the human community. Consequently, environmental degradation comes as a result of us human beings failing to observe environmental ethics, which are integrated in our cultural beliefs, traditions and norms. This narrative also argues that the belief structure and norms are derived from other members of the community that in this context is the animal world. Therefore, the ritualistic performances, which form the fabric of the society, have no reference outside of the environment (Olupona 2006:259).

G. Mogapi and D. Timile (2011:114) have observed that there is a relationship between animals, plants and human beings in Botswana and that certain animals are totems which ethnic groups in the country are identified with. E.g. Duiker (*Phuti*) is a totem for the Bangwato; Hyena (*Phiri*) is a totem for the Bakgalagadi. People from each and every ethnic group introduces themselves to strangers using their totem rather than their usual names, and these interrelations connect the fabric of the earth community in Setswana cosmology.

The above examples show that our Setswana cosmology does not hold humanity to be superior to other members of the Earth community. Rather, they are part and parcel of the Earth community. Humanity and other members of the Earth community are intertwined as exemplified by the animal being given a human identity and vice visa. Consequently, Condradie (2004:127) authenticates this argument by asserting that the Earth consciousness movement has awakened nations to the awareness that has caused the humanity to realise that they are not in control of ecosystem and that all forms of life are interconnected.

Setswana Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics

David Horrell (2014:139) notes, "Biblical studies has always been shaped by, responsive to, and enmeshed in, issues and priorities in the contemporary context, even when it operates in a primarily historical or archaeological mode and does not acknowledge such contemporary influences on the questions and approaches it pursues." One of the primary contemporary issues which Biblical studies have been called to engage is the environmental crisis. The call was raised by Lynn White Jr. through his classic article written in 1967, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis." In this article, Lynn White Jr blamed some Biblical texts such as the Genesis creation narrative as the ones which form the ideologies that contribute to environmental degradation. This caused some in Biblical studies to react to the accusation. This led to the birth of the Earth Bible international project which started in Australia. The project's main aim as noted by Steven

Rockefeller (2001:516) was to 1) Develop eco-justice principles appropriate for an eco-justice hermeneutic (modes for interpretation) for understanding the Bible. 2) Publish these interpretations as contributions to current debates on ecology, eco-ethics and ecotheology. 3) Provide a responsible forum within which the suppressed voice of Earth and the Earth community can be heard.

Lisa Sideris (2006:446) argues, "Eco theologians have scrutinised their own traditions in search of ethical resources that can be mined for environmental content." This paper seeks to development Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics, which is indigenous to a Setswana cosmology that will aid in environmental preservation. The paper chooses to develop Setswana ecological hermeneutics because other eco-justice hermeneutics that have been formulated by various scholars are inadequate to address and to analyze Setswana cosmological traditions. Setswana ecological Biblical hermeneutics is a reader-oriented interpretation for it takes the reader's context as its starting point. It takes the Setswana worldview seriously as it responds to the environmental crisis from a Botswana perspective. As Norman Habel (2000:25) writes, "The earth Crisis challenges us to read the Bible afresh and ask whether the biblical text itself, its interpreters or both have contributed to this crisis." Ecological biblical hermeneutics follows the ecojustice principles that have been developed in the Earth Bible which are: intrinsic worth, interconnectedness, voice, purpose, mutual custodianship and resistance.

The proposed Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics borrows concepts from Setswana indigenous ecological knowledge as its premise to approach and interpret a biblical text. The concept of covenant, which is derived from the *dikgafela* ceremonies whereby the Chief pours beer on the Earth as a form of acknowledging the covenantal relationship with God, will be implemented in the interpretational process. The other concept is the idea of *Motho* (person). Gabriel Setiloane argues that the concept of *Motho* in Sotho-Tswana cosmology is identified with nature, and that to be identified with nature gives one *Seriti* (identity or honour) in the society. Therefore, embed-

ded within these concepts is the idea of interconnectedness and liberating interdependence between the human being and all other members of the Earth community. The next section seeks to offer an Earth friendly reading of Genesis 8:20-9:17 from a Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics.

Genesis 8:20-9:17 from Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics

In the historical context of Genesis 8:20-9:17, God takes a look at what is happening on the Earth and behold, what he sees is just corruption. The Earth has been polluted, but the question is, since the Earth was created good in the Garden of Eden, then who corrupted and polluted the good Earth? According to this passage, it is humanity (Gen 6:5).[2] It is interesting to note that human beings have been and are always the polluters of the Earth. Moreover, the inclination to pollute the Earth is something which is in the heart of men, and it is consumerism embedded within the heart that drives humanity to engage in environmental degradation. Eco theologian Sallie Mcfague (2013:5) writes the following about the mentality of consumerism: "Consumerism is a cultural pattern that leads people to find meaning and fulfillment through the consumption of goods and services.' Consequently, in Genesis 7-8:19, God takes the initiative towards healing and transforming the Earth, which has been polluted by human beings, and he cleans the Earth through the flood though he regrets performing this act. Exegetical questions that arise for this discussion are, 1) is this covenant only cut between Noah and God? 2) What is God's promise concerning the Earth and 3) does this covenant encourage environmental degradation? It is to be noted that the flood reflects God's wrath towards those who have polluted the Earth, and

[2] This passage shows that immoral degeneration in the society leads to environmental degradation.

he always seeks to find the Earth the way he has created it, namely, as "good".

The flood does not complete the healing of the Earth but the sacrifice of blood offered to God completes the cleansing ceremony.[3] This sacrifice, which completes the circles of cleaning the Earth, is followed by the divine promise: "And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." This divine promise is a renewal of the creation pronouncement stated by God before the fall but now with the emphasis of an obligation of refraining from destroying the Earth again with floods (cf. Keil & Delitzsch 1975:151). The concept of appeasing God by a blood sacrifice in cleansing the Earth is central to Setswana ecological tradition. Rainmakers were responsible for performing this act so that God's anger should be appeased and in return the land be freed from the curse of God (cf. Amanze 2002:116). Moreover, for the sacrifice to be accepted by God, the participants (humanity) have to acknowledge that they have transgressed the environmental ethics that have been set by the ancestors.

In this narrative of Genesis 8:20-21, Noah builds an ark and offers a sacrifice. This sacrifice is accepted by God and thus led to the covenantal obligations whereby God says, "I will never curse the ground because of human beings." Noah makes the covenant not because he is superior to the Earth but notes the response, which God makes. God's response is not to Noah but to the ground which is used here as a representation of the Earth. Therefore, the covenant in this context is made between God and the Earth as it is unfolded and authenticated by the context, especially in Chapter 9:13, "I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and

[3] The offerings of blood are central in environmental cleansing in Setswana traditions when the people had violated the environmental ethics of the society.

the Earth." it is interesting to notes that rainbow symbol as covenant made by God is not unique to this biblical narrative but it is also present in Setswana traditions. In Setswana rainbow is called *mola wa badimo* or *motshe wa badimo*. Rather than being attributed to God (Singular) it is rather attributed to the ancestors. It usually interpreted as a sign that the rain has poured to the satisfactory amount. Setswana tradition celebration incorporate beer drinking as in both requesting for rain and in thanksgiving for rain. Consequently, when the rainbow appears in the sky, the ancestors are carrying a calabash of beer, validating that the covenant between the people and ancestors will certainly not be broken (1998:28).

Reading Genesis 8:20-9:17 from Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics highlights the theme of environment preservation. The narrative demonstrates that in this covenant, humankind is part and parcel of nature, hence the word Earth is used to incorporate both living things and nature at large. This narrative advocates for interconnectedness and liberating interdependence between human beings, the animal world and the Earth as it has been demonstrated in the Setswana cosmology. Therefore, the Genesis 8:20-9:17 narrative offers an Earth friendly way of reading the biblical text since it reflects the Setswana worldview with regard to the Setswana environmental ethic.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that at the core of environmental degradation is the failure of humanity to realise that they are not the central figure in God's creation but rather are part of the creation community. Failure to understand this has led to eco-injustice and the environmental crisis. This paper has described environmental degradation and demonstrated the importance and value of the other members of the Earth community, which they add to this web of relationships. While developments are important to the society, this paper has shown that

there are certain developments which are not sensitive to the fact that humanity cannot exist outside nature, neither is it above or independent of other members of the creation community. Lastly, this paper proposed Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics, which is derived from Setswana worldview. The proposed Setswana ecological hermeneutics offer us an Earth friendly way of reading the Bible as demonstrated by the reading of Genesis 8:20-9:17.

Reference

James *Amanze*, African Traditional Religions and Culture in Botswana: A Comprehensive Text Book. Gaborone; Pula Publishers 2002.

Altar *Belal*, Cooper Stuart & Khan Niaz, Corporate Environmental Responsibility and Accountability: What chance in vulnerable Bangladesh? Critical Perspectives on accounting 2015, 33-44.

John *Chryssavgis*, The Sacrament of the Earth: Insights from Orthodox Christian Theology and Spirituality. The Oxford Handbook if Religion and Ecology. New York, Oxford Press 2006.

K. M. *Eisenhardt*, Has Strategy Changed? MIT Sloan Management Review 2002, Winter 88-91.

Ernst *Conradie*, Towards an agenda for ecological Theology: An International dialogue. Ecotheology 2005, 10-1.

Musa *Dube*, "And God saw that it was very Good": An Earth-Friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1. Black Theology 13 (2015) 13-3.

Midn Arnaud *Frouel*, The Threat of Modernity to Religion, Culture and Government. French Naval Academy 2019, Sep 14.

Roger *Gottlieb*, Religion and Ecology- What is the connection and why does it matter? The Oxford Handbook if Religion and Ecology. New York, Oxford Press 2006.

Bongani *Gumbo*, Gendered Livelihoods and State Intervention In Fishing And Handicraft Production In the Wetlands of Ngamiland, Botswana, 1971-2000. Boleswa Journal of Theology, Religion and Philosophy 2014, 4-2.

David *Horrell*, Ecological Hermeneutics: Reflections on Methods and Prospects for the Future. Colloquium 2014, 46-2.

Carl Fredrick *Keil*, Franz Delitzsch, Commentary of the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company 1975.

Olaotswe *Kgosikoma*, Witness Mojeremane and Barbra A. Harvie, Pastoralists' Perception and Ecological Knowledge on Savanna Ecosystem Dynamics in Semi-arid Botswana. Ecology and Society 2012, 17.

Christinah *Masondo*, "A Superstitious Respect for the Soil?" Environmental history, social identity and land ownership – a case study of forced removals from Lady Selborne and their ramifications, c.1905 to 1977. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Stellenbosch 2008.

Christinah *Masondo*, Sotho-Tswana mythic animals: Stratagem for environmental conservation. Paper presented at the Historical Association of South Africa Biennial Conference, Hosted by the History Education Program, University of KwaZulu Natal, in Durban, on 26-28 June 2014.

Sallie *McFague*, Collected Readings. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2013 October.

G. *Mogapi* & D. Timile. Religious Studies: A Fresh Start. Gaborone, Diamond Educational Publishers 2011.

Fidelis *Nkomazana*, Obed Kealotswe & James Amanze, Biblical Studies, Theology, Religion and Philosophy: An Introduction for African Universities. Kenya, Zapf Chancery Research Consultants and Publishers 2010.

Jacob *Olupona*, Religion and Ecology in African Culture and Society. The Oxford Handbook if Religion and Ecology. New York, Oxford Press 2006.

Jan *Oosthoek*, and Barry K Gills, The Globalisation of Environmentat Crisis. Globalisation 2 (3) 2005 December.

Steven *Rockefeller*, The Earth Charter: Building a Global Culture of Peace. The Ecozoic Reader 2, 2001.

Gabriel *Setiloane*, African Theology: An Introduction. Braamfontein: Skotaville 1985.

Lisa H. *Sideris*. Religion, Environmentalism, and the Meaning of Ecology, in: The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology, 2006 November, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195178722.003.0021

Swati *Tyagi*., Neelam Garg., Rajan Paudel, Environmental degradation: Causes and Consequences. European Researcher 2014, 8- 82.

Charles *Willoughby*, "Notes on the Totemism of the Becwana," Addresses and papers read at joint meeting of the British and South African Associations for the Advancement of Science 3, 1909.


29

SECTION D

MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

VIII. "Living Water" in the narrative of John 4:5-42:

Quenching thirst in unexpected spaces[1]

Nina Müller van Velden[2]

Summary

Amidst the worst ongoing drought that parts of South Africa have experienced in decades, the reality of dependence on clean, running water has come to the fore anew. In a country where the gap between rich and poor is exceptionally high, with unacceptably high levels of poverty and unemployment, and innumerable instances of gender-based violence, this situation has impacted most severely those already most vulnerable: poor, black women. In dialogue with this South African context of racialised and gendered poverty, further aggravated by the toxicity of gender-based violence as well as the suffering of Mother Earth, the narrative of John 4:5-42 will be read: a narrative in which Jesus, a Jewish man, meets a Samaritan woman at a well and reveals Himself in ecological terms - as the One who provides Living Water. Such reading takes as a point of departure the contours of ecotheology, ecofeminism and gender criticism, and attempts to recognise the multiple binary categories which are represented in this narrative. Measured against the patriarchal prescriptions and expectations of the ancient narrative context, I suggest that there are particular

---

1 This chapter is devoted to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. It is through her courage in transgressing patriarchal protocol that the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was founded in 1989, and that a profound legacy of 30 years of transformation in African theological scholarship could take place.

2 Nina Müller van Velden is a postdoctoral research fellow at the North-West University, South Africa, and an ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. This chapter is based on the paper delivered at the Pan-African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, hosted at the University of Botswana on 1-5 July 2019. A word of appreciation goes to respondent Rev Georgina Kwanima Boateng as well as the peer reviewers, for their constructive feedback toward finalising this essay.

instances of transgression which take place, and that it is these transgressive acts – by both the Samaritan woman and Jesus – which culminate in transformation of the life of this woman and an entire community. For contemporary readers, specifically those who find themselves in privileged settings, this narrative may provide a means by which to challenge and be challenged: moving from deeply rooted racist, sexist, classist and anthropocentric convictions and practices, toward transgressive and transformative alternatives, whereby all who thirst may have access to living water in its fullest sense.

The South African context: Drought and its unequal impact

It takes no starker reminder than a drought to make one all too aware of creation's dependence on water as a source of life. Over the past few months, severe water restrictions have at times been in place in the Western Cape province of South Africa – necessitated by one of the worst droughts in this particular region in decades. At its worst, residents in this province had to abide by Level 6B water restrictions – the highest possible restriction on water usage in South Africa. Level 6B restrictions limit water usage per person to 50 litres per day.[3] Many residents in the province have since started making use of grey water in their homes, e.g. for flushing toilets and watering gardens. Although restrictions have been lifted slightly after recent good rainfall and a rise in dam levels in the province, the scarcity of clean water and the impact of the drought continue to play a large role in the lives of its residents.

The limitation of fresh water, brought about by the ongoing drought, has highlighted anew the dire ecological crisis and the impact of human irresponsibility and excessive consumption on natural resources – particularly given the fact that this coastal region is typically known

[3] See for example, The South African's *Level 6B water restrictions have started: Here's what they mean for Cape Town* (*https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/level-6b-water-restrictions-cape-town/*), accessed on 30 June 2019.

as one where water was seldom a scarcity.[4] The impact of the drought has especially been felt in a significant rise in food prices over the last few months - particularly fresh goods – and affects the poor, black majority most, vis. those already struggling to make ends meet. Many farmers had to decrease their farming activities, or stopped farming completely. This resulted in lay-offs and unemployment, and numerous full-time employment opportunities on farms have had to be changed to seasonal work.[5] Given the large role of agricultural activity in the South African economy and the already high levels of unemployment and poverty, both the immediate and subsequent impact on the daily lives of vulnerable communities continues to be immense.

Alongside lower levels of rainfall, the Western Cape in particular continues to experience increased levels of water usage in its urban areas, due to the demands of heightened population density and ongoing urban development. Demand is not keeping up with supply, and even those who have been able to numb their conscience by bathing in excess for decades at the expense of the majority of poor, black people, have started to experience the impact of limitations to clean and running water. Things are evidently not as they should be – and Mother Earth and her children are groaning and weeping louder and louder as a result of exploitative power-abuse, and the disregard of life in all its configurations, especially at the hand of a wealthy minority.[6]

---

4 Information boards on highways, local radio stations and newspapers continue to urge residents to keep up their efforts of using water sparingly and responsibly. Numerous public spaces (e.g. public toilets in shopping centres) have continued to supply customers with hand sanitiser, and/or limited taps with running water available for use.

5 See EWN's reports, for example: *30,000 jobs lost in WC agriculture sector due to drought* (*https://ewn.co.za/2018/12/21/drought-costs-30-000-their-jobs-in-agriculture-sector-in-wc*), accessed on 12 August 2019, and *How droughts will affect South Africa's broader economy* (*http://theconversation.com/how-droughts-will-affect-south-africas-broader-economy-111378*), accessed on 12 August 2019.

6 In his article titled, "Earth-Mission: The Third Mission of the Church," (2010) Norman Habel writes poignantly on the "cries of Earth" and the "cries for justice" in both ancient biblical writings, as well as contemporary settings. He emphasises the relation between poverty and the ecological disaster in which Earth finds herself as follows: "The poor of Earth are the most vulnerable in times of ecological

Forced to drink toxic water: The related injustices of poverty, drought, and gender abuse

In South Africa, women and girl children in particular are very familiar with groaning and weeping. The country's devastating statistics of gender-based, intimate partner and sexual violence continue to nauseate year after year.[7] The Christian faith tradition, which plays an important role in the South African society, is not exempt from such groaning and weeping; on the contrary, it is often within (so-called) Christian marriages, pastor-congregant relations, and adult-child relations where such forms of violence are condoned: women are told to return to their abusive husbands; pastors make advances on female congregants and children, threatening them to silence; fathers abuse and rape their daughters; and girls are taught that their bodies are the cause for boys and men "wanting sex" from them. Patriarchal and heteronormative teachings and perceptions continue to have a stronghold in many Christian faith communities in South Africa, which in turn shapes communities and entire societies.

In the context of drought, I contend, the "lack of water" as ecological crisis, and the "toxic water" of gender and sexual abuse – aggravated by unemployment and poverty - are closely related. These injustices are marked by the need for intersectionality[8] in order to recognise the

disaster, and the plight of the poor is likely to reach disastrous proportions in the near future" (2010:119).

7 Reliable statistics on the actual experiences of gender-based violence in South Africa is notoriously difficult to find. Many instances simply go unreported, or where they are reported, are subject to poor administration and insufficient documentation and reporting. The following provide an idea of what girls and women in South Africa experience: STATSSA's *Crime against women in South Africa Report 03-40-05* (*http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-40-05/Report-03-40-05June2018.pdf*), accessed August 12, 2019; and *Address by President Cyril Ramaphosa at the Presidential Summit on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, 1 November 2018* (*https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-gender-based-violence-and-femicide-summit-1-nov-2018-0000*), accessed August 12, 2019.

8 Kimberlé Crenshaw is regarded as the leading scholar in intersectionality, a term which became especially popular during the end of the 1980's and beginning of the 1990's. Although some scholars have noted the complexity of even just describing what intersectionality is (cf. McCall 2005:1771-1800), intersectionality

interplay of factors such as race, class, socio-economic status, employment, gender, sexual identity, location, etc. Not all South Africans are affected to an equal degree by the drought: being a black, poor, unemployed woman who lives in an informal settlement in Langa, for example, places one in an entirely different position than a white, wealthy, businessman who lives in an affluent suburb such as Durbanville.

Ecotheology, ecofeminism and gender criticism as theoretical contours

Theologians who focus on eco-justice, often called ecotheologians, take up seriously the enormity of the ecological crisis of earth and all that is dependent on it. Scholars such as Rhoads & Rossing (2016:9-10) contend that the single largest contributing factor to this crisis is the human species. Pursuing development and a way of living that has little or no regard for the impact it has on the Earth and the ecology has caused damage to the extent that a major transformation is now required. Historically, the church has been unsuccessful in changing anthropocentric and exploitative attitudes towards the Earth; it appears to have rather contributed to the crisis in terms of its attitude and practices. Rhoads & Rossing (2016) suggest a "thoroughgoing reformation" for the church: a worldwide and ecumenical transformation of proclamation, preaching, worship, teaching, witnessing, communal formation, action, and advocacy "so as to make care for all creation foundational for missional vocation." This calls for a *metanoia* of the mind and of practice of the whole church (Rhoads & Rossing 2016:9-10).

---

generally refers to the multiple dimensions of lived experiences of individuals and particular groups of people, which cannot be reduced to a single axis. Initially focused on the manner in which gender and race intersect (particularly in terms of Black women) (cf. Crenshaw 1989:139-167), it has since also come to include a range of other descriptors, including class, ethnicity, language, sexual identity, religion, politics, and geographical location.

The relation between gender justice and ecological justice has been noted, particularly, in the field of ecofeminist theology. Ecofeminist theologians make an effort to indicate the ways in which feminist and ecotheological concerns intersect, particularly regarding dominion of creation and the still-prevailing dualisms of human-nature, matter-spirit, body-mind, male-female and public-private – binaries that inherently represent inequality and distinction with the notion that one is "better" than the other. Within ecofeminist theological circles, emphasis is placed on the manner in which theological discourses should engage holistically with creation on the theme of justice – moving away from anthropocentric[9] and androcentric[10] worldviews, toward a Christian worldview that regards all forms of life as of equal importance.[11]

---

[9] An understanding of reality in which humans fulfil the central and most important role, with all other forms of created life subordinated to the needs of humanity.

[10] An understanding of reality in which men fulfil the central and most important role, with all other forms of human experiences subordinated to the needs and desires of men. Heteronormativity highlights the prominence and preference for heterosexual (male) and hegemonic masculine experiences.

[11] For the sake of this paper, this very simplistic description of ecofeminist theology is offered. Of course, as noted by Eaton (2005), the field of ecofeminism and ecofeminist theology is much more complex. Furthermore, there is a large range of diversity within ecofeminism as a whole, but also within ecofeminist theology (Eaton 2005:11-36). Rosemary Radford Ruether is considered one of the first ecofeminist voices who explored the intersection of feminism, ecology and religion. In her 1975 publication "New Woman, New Earth" she says the following (1975:204): "Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relations and the underlying values of this society." Lilian Siwila (2014) notes that ecofeminism is a conceptual framework, and "(a)lthough ecofeminism can be read as a universal concept, it is also interpreted differently according to context, just as the conceptual framework also seriously takes into account context such as race, gender and class" (2014:132).

In John 4:5-42, the reader encounters a narrative that speaks to the lived and very tangible experiences of groaning and weeping as a result of exploitative power-abuse. This narrative depicts the unlikely meeting between Jesus, a Jewish man, and an anonymous Samaritan woman at a well – a dialogue marked by transgression on the part of both Jesus and the woman. Moreover, it is a meeting in which the imagery of living water – an Earth image – is appropriated to convey life-giving truths which transform not only the life of the woman, but of an entire community; with the promise of "never drying up".

In an attempt to take seriously the experience of the character of the Samaritan woman and the Earth imagery of living water, I propose a gender-critical reading of this narrative, informed by the concerns and foci of ecofeminist theologians. As a hermeneutical framework, gender criticism refers to an approach that interrogates male/female and masculine/feminine binaries, and the type of power relations invested in such binaries (cf. Müller van Velden 2018:18). As it relates to engagement with biblical narratives and characters, Ken Stone (as quoted by Guest 2012:17) notes the following questions evoked by gender criticism as an approach:

> What norms or conventions of gender seem to be presupposed by this text? How might attention to the interdisciplinary study of gender allow readers of the Bible to tease out such presuppositions? How are assumptions about gender used in the structure of a particular plot, or manipulated for purposes of characterisation? How is gender symbolism related to other types of symbolism in the text? How does the manipulation of gender assumptions in a text relate to other textual dynamics, including not only literary but also theological and ideological dynamics?

In the subsequent reading of John 4:5-42, I pay particular attention to the manner in which Jesus, as a Jewish male, and the Samaritan woman, interact – specifically against the background of 1st century gender ideals and expectations. Moreover, I ask what potential the Earth imagery of living water in these narrative holds, and how it may speak to the complex South African contextual concerns detailed above. This requires a sensitivity for the multiple layers of power and binary pairs which are embedded in patriarchal narrative settings, such as the one of this Johannine narrative.

An unexpected meeting at a well: Jesus and the anonymous, Samaritan woman[12]

The narrative of John 4:5-42 can broadly be divided into three parts: the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (4:5-30); the conversation between Jesus and his disciples (4:31-38); and the residents of the town meeting up with Jesus (4:39-42). For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on part one (4:5-30), and part three (4:39-42).

Transgression of boundaries and binaries: John 4:5-30

Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet each other at Jacob's well in the Samaritan town, Sychar (4:5-6),[13] while his disciples went to town to buy food (4:8). Jesus, a Jewish man, meets a Samaritan woman, alone. As was to be expected from travelling, Jesus is tired from the journey. Notably, it is more or less the middle of the day (4:6).

According to the custom of the time, men and women were not to be alone in each other's presence in a public setting such as this one, unless they were married[14] or related.[15]

---

12 Direct quotations of the narrative of John 4:5-42 have been taken from the New International Version (2011) translation.

13 This area contained numerous Jewish reminders. There was the piece of land bought by Jacob (Gen 33:18,19). Jacob promised the piece of land to his son, Joseph, on his deathbed (Gen 48:22). After Joseph passed away in Egypt, his body was returned to Palestine and buried there (Jos 24:32) (Barclay 1975:147).

14 Following in the footsteps of numerous scholars who interpret this scene as a betrothal scene, which reminds of similar Old Testament well scenes (particularly Genesis 29, where the same well is mentioned when Jacob meets his first wife Rachel, also at midday), feminist scholar Sandra Schneiders (2003) interprets this as a betrothal-type scene in which the woman represents the Samaritan element of the Johannine community, who believed they were the new Israel, bride of the true Bridegroom, Jesus (Schneiders 2003:144). In as much as the narrative could reflect such a socio-religious, I prefer not to interpret this scene as a betrothal scene, rather following the suggestion of Jo-Ann Brant (2011) who asserts that the

Jesus' reason for being alone is a practical one: his disciples have gone in search of food in the town, and he has stayed behind to rest. However, the fact that the woman finds herself alone at the well in the middle of the day, is unconventional. Typically, women would go to wells in groups to draw water (among other reasons for their safety, as wells were some way out of town); and when they do so, it will much rather be done in the morning and in the late afternoon, than during the middle of the day.[16]

Jesus initiates conversation and asks the woman for a drink (4:7), to which she replies by stating the obvious: he is a Jew and she is a Samaritan woman, and therefore He is acting completely out of order by asking her for a drink (cf. Brant 2011:83). Should there be any doubt about the religious and political conventions, the narrator provides an aside to the audience by explicitly stating that Jews do not associate with Samaritans (4:9).[17] The rules of religious, ethnic and

---

woman's implicit denial of Jesus' request breaks from the convention and rather acts out a conflict narrative (2011:84).

15 Such gendered roles are embedded in the cultural script of honour and shame, which framed practically all behaviour within the first century Mediterranean context. Patriarchal frameworks shape such hierarchical understandings of persons based on their gender and is deeply embedded in the history of humanity. According to Denise Ackermann (1993:21-22) patriarchy can be described as a system with social, historical, religious and economic spheres which serves to uphold the domination of male over female – both on a literal and symbolical level. Its roots are in the legal, economic and social system of antiquity, which validates and enforces the supremacy of the male head of the (extended) household over its other members, i.e. wives, children, slaves and possessions.

16 In reference to the well and the use of the word πηγή which denotes specifically running water, Jo-Ann Brant notes that "water signifies life, but a well signifies water rights, over which men compete" (2011:82). In as much as women were typically the fetchers of water, they were not the owners of the source of water.

17 The background to this narrative is the long, painful history of conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans – at its heart a socio-political and religious divide that goes back all the way to the Assyrian exile. Therefore it is no surprise that the Samaritan woman herself expresses discomfort with the interaction between herself and Jesus, a Jewish man (4:9). She knows the Jewish purity laws all too well, and that the Samaritans are deemed unclean by Jewish believers. This categorisation goes as far as the Assyrian exile, when remaining persons from the ten exiled

gender interaction are clearly being transgressed. Besides the fact that a Jew is speaking here to an impure person (according to Jewish conviction) and does so by placing himself in a position of need and dependence, it is a *man* that is speaking to a *woman* in public (cf. Brant 2011:83).

Instead of directly answering her question on the cultural taboos on the table, Jesus responds metaphorically about his own identity (4:10-15), namely that He offers water that never runs dry and brings about eternal life. As is to be expected in a Johannine narrative where misunderstanding is a common theme, the woman at first does not understand what he is trying to tell her. Ironically enough it is precisely her awareness of boundaries, rules and restrictions set by religious beliefs, cultural convictions and ethnicity which lead her to transgress particular social and gendered conventions. She continues her bold engagement with Jesus, asking Him questions about the source of the living water He speaks of and his identity in comparison to their father, Jacob. Rather than taking offence or disregarding her, Jesus continues to engage with her by answering in image-laden language concentrated around water (4:11-14). Eventually the woman requests of Jesus the seemingly "magical" water that he is talking about (4:15).

Suddenly the direction of the conversation changes and the personal experiences of the woman become the focus (4:16-18), thereby intensifying the transgressive nature of this meeting at the well. Not only are Jesus and the woman talking to each other alone – they are talking about her former and present sexual relations and ultimately the most

---

Israelite tribes married non-Israelites who were displaced to their area by the Assyrians. According to the Jewish law these so-called "mixed marriages" were a very serious transgression. After the Babylonian exile the rebuilding of the temple under the lead of Ezra and Nehemia took place. The Samaritans, however, were not allowed to participate in the building process, due to their so-called unholiness. In reaction, they did their best to deter the rebuilding of the temple (Esra 4:3; Neh 2:20). Seeing as they were not allowed at the temple in Jerusalem, they established their own temple and priesthood on Mount Gerazim (cf. Brown 1966:170; Beasley-Murray 1987:60; Barclay 1975:149-151; Koester 2003:187-188). Since then the divide has been unrepairable – so much so, that they even avoided each other's geographical locations during travels.

private sphere of her life.[18] According to the ancient understanding of honour and shame, whereby a woman's modesty and sexuality are to be protected and kept within the realm of the private sphere[19] of the home lest she be considered shameless, this conversation places both Jesus and the woman in extremely dishonourable positions, which would certainly bring her and especially Jesus' reputation in jeopardy.[20]

---

18 When surveying traditional commentaries on this part of the narrative, it is obvious how many choose to portray this woman as having agency over her own body and sexuality, who chose to live a life of licentiousness – at times even being called a "prostitute". They interpret her reply to Jesus in 4:17 ("I have no husband") and his response in 4:18 ("The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true") as a classic confession of sin, followed by Jesus' pardon for her supposedly immoral behaviour. These include Brown (1966:171), Barclay (1975:156-157), and Beasley-Murray (1987:61). See Ridderbos (1997:158-161) for a short overview on some strands of interpretation on this part of the narrative, including references to the allegorical interpretations that have prevailed with regards to the "five husbands" of the "woman", allegedly with reference to 2 Kings 17:24. Musa Dube offers a refreshing alternative to these allegorical interpretations by offering a dramatic re-telling of the narrative, where the woman stands for both Africa and the women of Africa; "(t)he story is now retold as a comment on the various political regimes that have come through Southern Africa, converging in the present day Zimbabwe" (Dube 2001:41). Thereby, the tangible experiences of oppression, as experienced by most African woman (due to gender, racial/ethnic and religious tensions) as well as the economic and political crisis suffered by Africa as a continent, comes to the fore (Dube 2001:42).

19 That is, under the protection of her husband or father, or eldest brother or uncle where the former is not present.

20 Numerous feminist scholars question and disregard the "immoral woman" interpretation, as there is no deliberate indication or description of the woman as a prostitute or immoral person in the text. Gail O'Day (1998:384) notes, "Perhaps it is not surprising that commentators on this text have more readily accepted the offer of the gospel to the Samaritans, a despised people, than they have accepted the offer of the gospel to the woman, a despised sex. This resistance to Jesus' boundary breaking in his conversation with the woman takes two main forms. First, many commentators raise questions about the woman's moral character. Second, many commentators express doubts about the woman's ability to engage Jesus in serious conversation. Both strategies attempt to delegitimise the woman as a conversation partner for Jesus and hence as a recipient of the gospel."

Against the background of the socio-cultural context of the time, i.e. laws on marriage and divorce, women's dependency on men (and their physical, social and economic vulnerability without the patriarchal protection of a man), as well as their very limited input concerning the annulment of a marriage (only allowed in very particular circumstances), it would appear from their discussion that this woman has been on the receiving end of much pain, loss and abandonment: that she had been divorced or deserted by her husband, or that her husband had passed away, and/or that she found herself in a levirate marriage (cf. Habermann 2012:667). The audience is not provided with much detail, but one thing seems to be clear: she has experienced deep pain, and is well-versed with incidences of vulnerability.[21]

Read against this background, Jesus is starting not only an impermissible conversation at this point, but also an incredibly sensitive one. By posing his question about her husband, He is opening the door for this Samaritan woman to take her honesty towards him to an even deeper level. Her expectations were most likely that she would be rejected (yet again). But Jesus surprises her. He transgresses the conventions by recognising her as a person and thereby rejects not this woman, but rather the gendered and patriarchal constructions within which she has been cast by her community. Subsequently, she can recognise Him as a prophet (4:19). In this moment of unallowable intimacy and recognition, the woman understands that this man does not fit the norm of power abuse that she has become accustomed to. Her recognition is itself an act of transgression – of crossing the boundaries of who would be expected to recognise Jesus, and who would not.

---

[21] Lilly Nortjé-Meyer offers a decolonising reading of the Samaritan woman (2018:145-154), which is particularly relevant for my own context of the Dutch Reformed Church – the largest Afrikaans reformed church denomination in South Africa, that was a convenient spouse of the nationalistic political agenda of the apartheid government until 1994. Nortjé-Meyer offers strong critique on the Afrikaans translation of Charles Erdman's commentary on the Gospel of John, authored by DR Snyman. She notes that "(t)he colonial ideology of the white Afrikaans male has clearly influenced his view of the person of the Samaritan woman and her conversation with Jesus. It serves as a cultural text that is central to the strategies of modern imperialism" (Nortjé-Meyer 2018:145).

This recognition opens the door for the woman to scrape together her courage and put the most obvious and divisive topic between them (besides gender!) on the table, namely their different places of worship. This is much more than a religious discussion: at its heart, it is a political discussion about ethnicity and nationalistic identity. For a woman to speak of such public matters, let alone to a man, whilst they are alone, was unimaginable. Religion, ethnicity, gender, marital status, sexuality: all structures and institutions of social power (or not), have now been put on the table. Yet again, Jesus participates fully in this episode of transgressive behaviour, engaging her beliefs and convictions. Finally, the intensive "us" and "them" rhetoric comes to a halt when Jesus reveals himself to her as the expected Messiah, the one speaking to her here and now (4:20-26).

The disciples return from town, but know better than to ask what is going on (4:27). One might assume that, at the very least, they would not approve of the interaction they are witnessing between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Whatever their body language may communicate appears to have no effect on the woman. She is overwhelmed with what has happened and returns to her town, leaving behind her water jar (4:28). The transgressive engagement between herself and Jesus leads her to transgress also in her own town. She boldly invites its Samaritan residents to transgress collectively by returning with her to the Jewish cohort at their well, to make up their own mind. They agree and make their way to Jesus - even if just to satisfy their own curiosity (4:29-30).

From transgression to transformation: John 4:39-42

It is the transgression of boundaries, of rules, of "proper places" for the "he" and "she" and the "them" and "us" of this narrative, which creates space in which this woman can experience life-giving transformation; moreover, it encourages the woman to transgress boldly in her own context: and it is her transgression, back in her town, which subsequently leads to complete transformation of the lives of many more. She is not only a transgressor, she is also a transformative agent in her own right.

Her testimony about her life-changing meeting with Jesus touches the lives of large numbers of Samaritans who come to faith (4:39), and some even plead with Jesus to stay on (4:40). Whereas this woman's story was previously cause for rejection, it has now become cause for invitation, inclusion, and radical new realities. Her contact with the provider of living water and her boldness in the context of multiple transgressions, has empowered her to become a channel of the living water for others. This marginalised woman becomes an agent of change, sharing her testimony and thereby fulfilling the role of a disciple – a role which is the last that would have ever been expected from her. From transgression in a public space at a well, she transgresses in the public space of her community – thereby fulfilling a typically male role, and destabilising a seemingly unmoveable system of socio-political order.

This is a narrative which also invites contemporary readers to participate. First, to revisit their own long-held perceptions of power over, patriarchy, heterosexualism, racism, privilege, and/or forceful exclusion based on social categories determined by a minority in power – a challenge already posed by the Samaritan woman to Jesus. Second, if contemporary readers – especially those in privileged contexts – are willing to face their own positions of power and their complicity in keeping specific binaries firmly in place for their own benefit, they may be invited to become participants in processes of transformational transgression: processes in which life-threatening beliefs and practices are exchanged for life-giving ones.

This is by no means a possibility which simply sustains a dichotomy between the spiritual and material or the heavenly and earthly. It is, after all, a very concrete, material, Mother Earth image of living water – of water which wells up as a spring, to eternal life – which invites such transformational transgression of power relations. Such radical transformation of life cannot simply remain within the sphere of human-human relations but must also extend to human-Earth relations.

Recognise, imagine, practise: Moving the discourse toward transformational transgression in local faith communities

The interrelated injustices represented by and amplified by the drought in South Africa – especially against the country's long history of colonial, racist, and sexist exploitation, require concrete action from local faith communities: first, to recognise the multiple and ongoing levels of injustices in their own contexts and their particular role in it; second, to imagine the transgression of particular life-threatening power relations which are built upon power-over, binary thought; and third, to pursue practical expressions of transformational trans-gression at a grassroots level.

Recognition

Recognising the particular forms of transgression and transformation which take place throughout the narrative of John 4 first implies an awareness of the first century Mediterranean context in which the narrative is set. In the contemporary context of my own location as an ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, an awareness of not only the drought conditions, socio-economic injustices, and gender and sexual violence in South Africa is required, but also of the particular racialised socio-economic privileges afforded to the majority of white members of the Dutch Reformed Church and the manner in which all of these categories are interrelated. Such an explicit contextual awareness is required before members can meaningfully participate in imagining what transgression of the status quo could look like, and before they can commit themselves to particular expressions of transformational transgression toward healing and wholeness of Mother Earth and all who depend on her.[22]

[22] Up to this point in time, the Dutch Reformed Church's engagement with the drought has mainly been that of short-term crisis management (providing water, providing feed for cattle, providing funds for drought-relief). Although various synods have task teams for ecology who provide resources to congregants from

Drawing on the narrative of John 4:5-42, this would imply a deliberate attempt to recognise "Samaritan women" in present day situations – that is those persons who are cast as "the other" based on their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, income, address, employment status, etc. Moreover, it asks for an admittance and acknowledgement by those who are in positions of power and privilege, of the myriad of structural and systemic power-over relations and the exploitation they continue to feed on. In what ways are we distributors of toxic water, which impacts not only the Earth, but also the very concrete, lived experiences of people who struggle for survival? What is the cost of the ongoing pursuit of wealth, provision, financial gain, on members of society who are excluded from opportunities to take up their rightful place and space? Recognising power-over and exploitation in human relations – in narratives past and the tangible present – could help to expose the interest to exploit one's neighbour and the Earth, and the close relationship which exists between exploitation of vulnerable persons and the exploitation of the Earth.[23]

Imagining transgression

I suggest that it is Jesus' self-description – the image of the One who provides living water that will not dry up, versus water which will lead

time to time, the connection between gender injustice and ecological injustice is seldom mentioned or even seemingly recognised.

[23] Under the (tongue in the cheek?) heading "Jesus the proto-environmentalist," David Horrell (2010) remarks that ecotheological writers have turned to depictions of Jesus in the Gospels and find in Jesus support for a model of concern for the environment and care for God's creation (2010:63). He cautions, though, that presentations of Jesus – be it as liberator, proto-feminist, vegetarian or pro-environment – are shaped by the contemporary agenda and its pressing concerns. The type of questions interpreters ask, shape the kind of answers they will find (Horrell 2010:64). Fully aware of these remarks, I propose that faith communities should make a greater effort in creating interactive and dialogical spaces for reading biblical narratives; specifically also with co-believers whose contextual realities differ from their own.

one to thirst again (4:13-14) – that could be helpful in moving from recognition towards imagining transgression.

The voices of female African feminist scholars are particularly helpful in such a radical reimagining and reclaiming of justice for all creation. The mode of story-telling and the role of biblical narratives in envisioning the present and future of existence on this planet is a familiar way of engaging contextual realities. Furthermore, taking as conversation-partner the place from where one speaks marks the feminist theology of praxis[24] – an approach intuitively familiar within the circles of African feminist scholarship.[25]

The familiar and relatable image of water is appropriated in John 4 not merely to start a conversation, but also to convey profound life-changing truths (Koester 2003:1-18). Such narrative descriptions of an embodied God in the shape of a male person, who draws on Earth imagery to convey his identity, and does so within a framework of transgression of the status quo of patriarchal power-over expectations, could be useful for imagining ways of transgression, particularly anthropocentric, patriarchal and exclusionary theological discourses in faith communities. The transgression of the Samaritan woman is of equal importance. By recognising her agency in this narrative, her boldness, and her ability to actively participate in transgression, and step out in courage to not only receive transformation, but also ignite transformation on a communal level, we may receive cues on how to

---

[24] As defined by Denise Ackermann (2006:227), feminist theology of praxis "begins with the critical analysis of given contexts and a particular focus on how gender roles are understood and lived out. It then seeks to engage contextual situations with liberating and transformative praxis in order to encourage human flourishing, undergirded by the belief that such theology is done in furthering God's reign on earth (*sic.*)."

[25] Three examples of African feminist publications which could be helpful for local faith communities, and that are characterised by these notions and include a specific focus on the ecology, are: Dube, MW & Nyambura, JN (eds.). 2001. *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications; Kanyoro, MRA & Njoroge, NJ. (eds.). 1996. *Groaning in Faith. African Women in the Household of God*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers; and Mante, JOY. 2004. *Africa: Theological and Philosophical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*. Accra: SonLife Press.

transgress the deep-treaded roads of exploitation, racism, gender injustice, and environmental exploitation. This requires of those in positions of privilege and power, to be unsettled, critiqued, questioned and challenged, to give up their stronghold in particular relations – irrespective of what the reaction from peers may be. This cannot be a superficial attempt at "reaching out" and then returning to enclaves of privilege behind high walls. It asks a radical shift of giving up and giving back land, resources, of space and wealth. What will living water mean in specific situations? And who are we acknowledging and listening to when attempting to imagine the answer to such a question? How uncomfortable are we willing to get? How can daily living, decision-making, policy implementation, economic involvement, political participation, access to housing, access to resources, safety, and transport be participatory, non-abusive and non-exploitative processes in relation to all and everything? How do we understand the relation between the various intersections of justice? How do we break down the divide between "human" and "non-human" concerns? What would an alternative look like?

Committing to transformational transgression

By engaging the use of an ecological image in conversation with a Samaritan woman in the narrative of John 4, a space may be created where members of faith communities can raise questions relating to their own narratives: what does Jesus' promise of living water to a Samaritan woman mean in practical terms for all of the Earth? Living water, after all, is metaphorically understood in Jewish tradition as representing God's life-giving power and wisdom (cf. Brant 2011:84). How do we identify with the Samaritan woman's witness and role as reformer and disciple in terms of our ecological realities? How may we confess with word and deed about living water that does not run dry, whilst finding ourselves in socio-economic and political systems where some have had to fight drought and lack of clean, running water for decades? What are the theological idols we consider as proverbial "true places of worship" that are in need of drastic critique? What are the limited understandings we need to be freed from, if we are to

see both the prophet Jesus in our midst as well as the prophetic Samaritan women? How do we resist the weeping and groaning of the Earth and all living creatures who depend on her, and how can we commit to systemic and structural justice in South Africa – one free of toxic water being forced upon particular groups of people?

Conclusion

By reading the narrative of John 4 through a gender-critical lens, framed by ecotheological and ecofeminist concerns, the transgression and transformation present in the dialogue and actions of both the Samaritan woman and of Jesus have been pointed out. These two categories of transgression and transformation could become a means through which members of local faith communities, particularly in my own privileged context of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, can be shifted toward new understandings and new beliefs about who we are in relation to Godself, to other humans, and to Mother Earth. By recognising the radical impact of the imagery of living water in the narrative of John 4 – also in very concrete terms for the life of the Samaritan woman - local faith communities may be invited to take up seriously the call to recognise and acknowledge injustice, transgress power-infused boundaries and binaries, and commit to practical expressions of transformational transgression on grassroot level; that is, to take seriously the groaning and weeping of their vulnerable neighbours – particularly those of women and Mother Earth.

References

EWN, 30,000 jobs lost in WC agriculture sector due to drought. December 21, 2018. [Online]. Available: *https://ewn.co.za/2018/12/21/drought-costs-30-000-their-jobs-in-agriculture-sector-in-wc.* (August 12, 2019).

Denise M. *Ackermann*, Meaning and power: some key terms in feminist liberation theology, in: Scriptura 44 (1993) 19-33.

Denise M. *Ackermann*, From Mere Existence to Tenacious Endurance. Stigma, HIV/AIDS and a Feminist Theology of Praxis, in: I. A. Phiri / S. Nadar (Eds.), African Women, Religion, and Health. Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudzima Oduyoye, Mary Knoll - New York: Orbis 2006, 221-242.

William *Barclay*, The Daily Study Bible. Revised Edition. The Gospel of John, Volume 1, Chapters 1-7, Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press 1975.

George R. *Beasley-Murray*, WBC, 36, Waco: Word Books 1987.

Jo-Ann *Brant*, John. Paideia Commentaries on the NT, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2011.

Raymond E. *Brown*, The Anchor Bible. The Gospel according to John I-XII (Volume 29), New York: Doubleday 1966.

The Conversation, How droughts will affect South Africa's broader economy. March 6, 2019. [Online]. Available: *http://theconversation.com/how-droughts-will-affect-south-africas-broader-economy-111378* (August 12, 2019).

Kimberlé *Crenshaw*, Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, in: University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989 (1:8) (1989) 139-167. Available at: *http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8*

Musa W. *Dube*, John 4:1-42 – The Five Husbands at the Well of Living Waters: The Samaritan Woman and African Women, in: N.J. Njoroge / M.W. Dube (Eds.), Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2001, 40-65.

Heather G. *Eaton*, Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies. Introductions in Feminist Theology, London - New York: T&T Clark International 2005.

Derryn *Guest*, Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix 2012.

Norman *Habel*, Earth-Mission: The Third Mission of the Church, in: Currents in Theology and Mission, 37:2 (April) (2010) 114-125.

Ruth *Habermann*, Gospel of John: Spaces for Women, in: L. Schottroff / M-T. Wacker (Eds.), Feminist Biblical Interpretation. A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature, Grand Rapids - Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans 2012, 662-679.

David G. *Horrell*, The Bible and the Environment. Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology, London - Oakville: Equinox 2010.

Craig R. *Koester*, Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel. Meaning, Mystery, Community, 2nd ed., Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress 2003.

Leslie *McCall*, The Complexity of Intersectionality, in: Signs, 30, No. 3 (Spring) (2005) 1771-1800. Available: *http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/426800*

Nina E. *Müller van Velden*, When the lines are blurred: A gender-critical reading of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and John 13:1-17, Unpubl. Diss.: Stellenbosch University 2018.

Lilly S. J. *Nortjé-Meyer*, In Search for the Female Sage: A Decolonial Reading of the Story of the Samaritan Woman (John 4), in: M.J. Nel / J. Punt (Eds.), Reading Writing Right. Essays presented in honour of Professor Elna Mouton, Stellenbosch: Sun Press 2018, 145-154.

Gail *O'Day*, John, in: C.A. Newsom / S.H. Ringe (Eds.), Women's Bible Commentary, Expanded Edition, Louisville: Westminster John Knox 1998, 381-393.

Rosemary *Radford Ruether*, New Woman, New Earth. Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation, New York: Seabury Press 1975.

Cyril *Ramaphosa*, Address by President Cyril Ramaphosa at the Presi-dential Summit on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide. November 1, 2018. [Online]. Available: *https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-gender-based-violence-and-femicide-summit-1-nov-2018-0000* (August 12, 2019).

David M. *Rhoads* / Barbara R. *Rossing*, A Beloved Earth Community in an Ecological Age, in: Context in Theology and Mission 43/1 (2016) 9-17.

Herman N. *Ridderbos*, The Gospel according to John. A Theological Commentary, Grand Rapids - Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans 1997.

Barbara *Rossing*, Introduction: Eco-Reformation and the 500th Anniversary in 2017, in: Currents in Theology and Mission 43/2 (2016) 1-2.

Sandra M. *Schneiders*, Written That You May Believe. Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, New and Expanded Edition, New York: Crossroad 2003.

Lillian C. *Siwila*, "Tracing the ecological footprints of our foremothers": Towards an African feminist approach to women's connectedness with nature, in: Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae, December 40(2) (2014) 131-147.

The *South African*, Level 6B water restrictions have started: Here's what they mean for Cape Town. February 1, 2018. [Online]. Available: *https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/level-6b-water-restrictions-cape-town/* (June 30, 2019).

STATSSA, Crime against women in South Africa, Report 03-40-05. 2018. [Online]. Available: *http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-40-05/Report-03-40-05June2018.pdf* (August 12, 2019).

SECTION E

A STUDENT'S ENGAGEMENT

IX. Some Biblical Literature, Earth-Based Creation Stories and Ecological Justice

Seboifo M. Pabalinga

Summary

This chapter investigates the intersection of the topics of Ecological Justice, Biblical hermeneutics and Postcolonialism. Mother Earth is faced with the extinction of some natural resources, vegetation and animal species, the tearing of the ozone layer, the defacing of natural features, global warming and climate change and many other catastrophes because of human exploitation, lust for wealth, unending over-consumption and self-gratification. The anthropocentric and patriarchal mindset that has led to these devastations is borne from a traditional interpretation of texts like Genesis 1:26, which say that God charged human beings with the duty to look after and supervise *the rest of the creation. In this regard, biblical hermeneutics institutionalised the pollution and destruction of the eco-system. The eco-system is under a colossal threat perpetuated by large-scale industrialisation which goes hand in hand with the maiming of landscapes and the production of noxious gases, which harm both vegetation and atmospheric conditions. The effects of climate change exert an enormous threat on humanity, wild animals and vegetation alike.*

Introduction

This chapter establishes and interrogates an intersection of biblical hermeneutics, environmental issues and creation stories. The sections it covers are as follows: The Problem and its Christian Roots, Paul's Theology of the Environment, The Bible in Nature – Nature in the Bible, The Solution: Science and Christology, and A Prophetic Voice for Stewardship. Mother Earth is faced with the reckless and

indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, vegetation and animals through human lust for wealth, selfish aspiration, consummation and gratification.

The Problem and its Christian Roots

While God continuously sustains the existence of the earth, eco-problems started when the Christian community ascribed to the care of nature a low priority and value. Lynn White (Carling 2005) dismisses the perception, which is common amongst Christians, that nature exists to entertain and serve humanity's needs and wants. White's attitude is crucial because such a mindset is from an oppressive ideology that propagates colonial tendencies, patriarchy, anthropocentricism, gender oppression, and racial and class discrimination and tends to cultivate dichotomies in perhaps every imaginable sphere of life. Biblically, the human being appears as God's special creation with an upper intellectual ability. Lockyer (1986:261) states that in Genesis 1:26, God made human beings on the sixth day and bestowed humanity with the stewardship of the whole creation. Carling (2005:1) states that biblically, the earth on which human beings live is a divine creation and is thus divinely-owned. Erickson (2001:168) argues that since a human being was created in God's image, who created the rest of the species that should have motivated the Christian society to smoothly and harmoniously co-exist with the rest of creation and ecology.

Humanity has turned out to be the worst enemy of ecology because of its supposed higher intellectual capacity. Production of weapons of mass destruction and implements oozes noxious gasses, which results in ecological devastation and annihilation of natural species. These devastations have not spared humanity itself. Concerning water bodies, human destructive activities often include, among others, the disposal of waste into the seas, the spillage of oil into the oceans, and the damming of streams and rivers. Human made industrial explosives, weapons and landmines used for exploitation and war often maim human beings and evict natural organisms from their natural abodes, making them uninhabitable.

The 21st century has experienced drastic climate change. Various conventions on nature conservation have been passed at an international level. Among those conventions are The Ramsar Convention on Wetland of International Importance, Especially as Waterfowl Habitats. It was promulgated under Gazette No.225/1983 Federal tabled Law Federal Law. It was concluded in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971. The importance of this convention is the protection ecological, botanical, zoological, limnological or hydrological systems. Washington legislated under Federal Law Gazette No. 225/1983 a law to protect endangered species. This came after the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, CITES. This was introduced to curb the trading interests of endangered species, Federal Environmental Agency – Austria (1994:xi).

Global climate, particularly as affecting the Ozone Layer, was discussed with a view to reduce the consumption of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), which destroy the ozone layer in the stratosphere at heights of between 20 and 30 km. The convention was signed at Vienna on the 22nd March, 1985, Federal Environmental Agency – Austria (1994:i).

The introduction of the greenhouse gases has distorted atmospheric conditions by producing more carbon dioxide (CO2) than needed. A report on Carbon Dioxide and other greenhouse gases suggests that the average earth temperature will in the next century rise by 0.3 Celsius each decade, unless measures are taken to reduce the greenhouse gasses carbon dioxide, methane (CH4), chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and nitrous oxide (N2O). The report goes on that, if steps are taken to reduce the pollution through these gasses, the rate may reduce to 1 or 2 degrees Celsius per decade Federal Environmental Agency – Austria (1994:31). The continued veld burning and deforestation have increased the yield of carbon dioxide with the consequence of global warming. The variance of temperature on both land and oceans has been felt. This has generally resulted in scarcity of water, poor harvest, loss of wildlife and domestic animals, outbreak of diseases and pests and consequently environmental degradation, which impedes the socio-economic development contribution of cities (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, Habitat 1997:9).

Paul's Theology of the Environment

According to Togarasei in Ghana Bulletin of Theology (2008:145), Paul insists that the whole creation is God's gracious output and that humanity was bestowed with the whole power of governance over other species. Togarasei posits that Paul probably ignored the fact that God charged humanity in Genesis with some responsibility to be the caretaker, trustee, steward and manager. Togarasei (2008:144) defines environment as human surroundings. He asserts that Paul's vision concerning the environment is attached to the Old Testament, and argues that this is not a coincidence, as the Old Testament is Jewish literature and Paul, a Jew, was proud of his Jewish heritage.

The story of creation in Genesis 1:3 was the pillar of Paul's assertion. Paul prided himself as a Jewish scholar who received his full tutelage under Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3). Togarasei again argues that Paul's message regarding the environment and eschatology leaves the reader with more questions than answers (2008:145). The message does not clearly spell out the ultimate abode of the resurrected. It is not clear if the resurrected are going to inherit heaven as their eternal home or earth and live with the environment. The New Testament set up is not a bye product of systematic theology. The writings were done on the reactions of specific conditions obtaining at that time. Conversely, Togarasei argues that Paul regarded the Old Testament as canonical (*ibid*). Paul's teachings about God's creation and authority given to humanity over all the species influenced his perception about the environment. Togarasei echoes some doubts concerning if Paul was cognisant of God's expectations regarding the stewardship of humanity over creation (2008). Sometimes Paul betrays a belief in valuing nature and the environment, but other times he delivers an anthropocentric perspective of the ecosystem.

The Bible in Nature – Nature in the Bible

According to Herbert Lockyer (1986:261), God made a human being on the sixth day to dominate the governance of the whole creation, which had been made in the first five days. This made human beings

a special part of God's creation. The commentary of the Life Application Study Bible (1997:6) explains that God made a program with consecutive events. During the first five days God decided to make other components of creation. A human being was created on the sixth day in God's image. By so saying it is assumed that God meant to empower humanity with the preservative spirit of a true shepherd and steward, who does not indulge in self satiation by indiscriminately disrupting the growth and development of other species.

Ecology played a role in the development of theology. The port of Byblos in Syria was the exporter of the inner bark of the plant out of which the Bible later developed and hence the English name Bible (Viljoen 2010:38). After the leather scrolls, the books of the Bible were written on such a bark whose tree was known in Greek as "papyrus," which has been translated into the English word "paper." In Genesis 6:14, God instructed Noah to build an ark made of cypress wood, coated with pitch inside and out. The ark was meant to conserve Noah's immediate family and a male and a female of every creature that moved on earth, Life Application Study Bible (1997:18). In Exodus 2:3, Moses was hid on the bank of the River Nile in a basket made out of the papyrus plant, coated with tar and pitch. The Egyptian authorities had decreed that all male born babies of the Hebrew community should be killed at birth. Moses escaped that death plan.

In the New Testament, when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, raw materials in the form of tree branches were laid down on the path where he was to pass through (Mark 11:1-8, Life Application Study Bible 1997:1635). Togarasei (2008) hints that Paul probably overlooked the fact that humanity in Genesis was bestowed with the responsibility to be a caretaker, trustee, steward and manager. According to Genesis 1:29, God says the trees and the plants are given to human beings for consumption. Species of the air and of the land were also assigned to consume vegetation as God had planned.

R.C.J. Carling (2005:1) opines that according to the Bible, the world in which human beings live is a divine creation by a council of deities (emanating from the council, "let us make man in our image" in Genesis 1:16). Divinity sustains the continued existence of the earth. Humanity has been charged with the stewardship as well as custody of the earth. Humanity should not abdicate the responsibility bestowed

upon itself, of ensuring the smooth management of the affairs which please the Creator. God's directive on how humanity should look after the eco-system is clear cut and free of ambiguity. Carling (2005) laments that Christianity seems not to do much to promote the care and protection of creation as God directed. Lynn White, quoted in Carling (2005), dismisses the perception amongst Christians that nature exists to entertain humanity. Christians have been observed as passive players in encouraging preservation of the ecology. Trevor J. Saunders (1992:61) argues that a human being has been privileged to be the overseer of the whole ecology, thus placing humanity as a best of the God's creation. Notwithstanding all the glory bestowed upon humanity, human beings are the worst enemies of the environment because of the soused upper intellectual ability. A human being possesses weapons which are virtually meant for his/her protection, but they are used to destroy both the human being and the environment. White, quoted in Carling (2005:2), argues that the Christian society should divorce the delusion that the purpose of the existence of nature is to serve humanity.

Millard J. Erickson (2001:168) argues that because human beings were created by the same God who created the rest of the other species, that should bring a closer relationship and a smooth co-existence among all members of the Earth community. He states that the word "ecology" is derived from the Geek work *oikos*, which means "house" (2001:169). This conscientises a human being to introspect as ecology is polluted through different ways, attributable to human action. What hurts one part of ecology will consequently hurt the other of the same house in the form of creation (*ibid*). The world conventions on conservation of nature, endangered species and prevention of damage to the atmospheric conditions, are the indicators of poor human stewardship towards ecosystem. Such global conventions are discussed in this paper. Human beings, animal species, vegetation, water bodies, the atmosphere and so on, is a unit of God's creation in one house, namely, the Earth.

Carling (2005:2) however, asserts that world body organisations have advocated for the preservation of creation. The UK White Paper on the environment entitled "This Common Inheritance" (1990), declared without prejudice to new developments such as science, the rate of population growth, the changes humanity impose on nature

and the environment, the earth maintains its fundamental being. During the Earth Summit in 1992, United Nations affiliated bodies submitted to the common action to mitigate environmental pollution. This was subsequent to the submission of the UK White Paper on the environment to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Carling (2005:3) states that the purpose of The John Ray Initiative was to put together a comprehensive scientific and Christian appreciation of environment, which can yield far reaching effects.

Ecological disruption based on the relationship between Religion and Environment has been a centre for discussion at different platforms and countries alike. In November 21-23, 1997, a Conference on Ecology and Bible Principles for Interpretation was held in Australia. The conference was sponsored by the Adelaide College of Divinity and the Charles Strong Trust. The conference discussed, among others, the various ways in which humanity perceives the environment. That was discussed under the heading "The Adelaide Declaration" which stated that human perception of sacredness of the Earth differs from one person to another. Togarasei (2008:145) argues that Paul's Green Theology creates the impression that humanity was unreservedly made to prey on creation. Togarasei observes that Paul as an Old Testament scholar, held the story of Creation in Genesis 1:3 as his pillar. The global conventions illustrate that humanity has generally differed on whether or not creation has been polluted and abused. The participants unanimously agreed to assist to sustain the ecology and ensure that the damage made to ecology is every person's responsibility. The part played by the Aboriginal peoples of Australia was appreciated and that raised a hope that by the year 2001, a significant change will be noticed. The Declaration encouraged the Governments at large to persuade the companies and businesses which trade in their countries to be ecologically compliant. The Christian community attending implored fellow members in Australia to promulgate the news of the nationwide rites of confession.

"The Earth Bible Principles" pitted biblical scholars throughout the nations against scholars of ecology. It was observed that the Earth on which human beings live is constituted with valuable species, with each playing its significant role. These species are interconnected to each other and bear the relationship with human beings in terms of

space and habitat. Vegetation provides food and shelter for both humanity and animals. Human beings feed on animal meat and use animals as a means of transport. Domestic animals are protected by human beings from predators. Carling (2005) dismisses perception that nature exists to entertain humanity.

Guiding Ecojustice Principles Chapter Two in Earth Bible Volume I, covered the ecological orientation of the Bible. It points out the specific words in the Bible such as "God" and "creation". The discussion purposefully focused on the usage and treatment of creation rather than on theology and religion in order to accommodate other bodies like Buddhism and scientists, which do not necessarily subscribe to the notion of God.

The Solution: Science and Christology

Carling (2005) states that The John Ray Initiative attempts to bring together efforts in the form of science and Christology, which will capture the continued disruption of ecological growth. The Christians stand a chance to outreach to the communities and teach them about healthy environment and co-existence. The implementation of the transformation was done through the distribution of informative pamphlets on the 20th of February, 1999, in London. That was done to motivate theological understanding and the individuals' responsibility over the care of nature.

Lynn White, Jr. in the paper entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" Volume 155, 3767 of March 10, 1976, mentions a little valley in England exposed to undesirable human treatment. She witnessed extermination of rabbits to give way to the capitalist interest of the human residents neighboring the valley. White cites the ecological disruption of ecology along the Aswan Dam, which is a result of the construction of the ships intended to fight the Carthaginians. This substantiates the long history of ecological disruption through human capitalistic interests. The production of poisonous products should be minimised. The above story illustrates the selfish interests

of humanity at the expense of living creatures under human supervision.

A Prophetic Voice for Stewardship

Erickson (2001) asserts that the Christian community should be encouraged to prophetically and jointly address ecological destruction. The Christian community should revisit Genesis 1:26 in order to appreciate the custodianship and stewardship bestowed upon humanity in respect of creation. Ezekiel 47:12 states that trees and water are essential commodities for human sustenance. If the ecology is protected, humanity will reap the benefits of edible fruits, medicines and a healthy environment.

Humanity as the overseer, the trustee, caretaker and the manager of creation, has failed to carry out its duties of stewardship and supervision. Humanity abdicated its responsibility of custodianship of the ecosystem and the environment. Human beings are primarily responsible for the disruption of the ecosystem, the introduction of greenhouse gases, veld burning, deforestation and many more activities in the form of the production of weapons of war.

Following the creation stories in the Bible, the Church ought to have a high regard for conservation of the Earth. For example, the Bible was produced out of a raw material, an inner bark of a papyrus plant (Viljoen 2010:38). As already hinted in the section "The Bible in Nature – Nature in the Bible," Noah's ark, made from nature itself, was meant to house and conserve the traces of all the living creatures moving on earth before God destroyed the other creation with the flood (Genesis 6:14). Furthermore, raw materials in the form of tree branches were laid on the path where Jesus, who was riding on a colt, was to pass through, which signified the kingship of Jesus (Mark 11:1-8).

Paul's green theology rooted around the creation story in the Bible as found in Genesis 1:3, where God gave humanity authority to rule over all the living creatures moving on Mother Earth. Man-made and mechanical equipment and instruments turn to ooze noxious gases which do not only pollute the atmosphere but also destroy lives in the

seas and on land. Human beings have gone beyond God's expectation of killing wild animals and harvesting the vegetation for a normal human consumption. These species are facing an absolute eradication, through commercial collection. The church should strive to fight for conservation of ecology by vocally speaking against the unwise veld burning and the indiscriminate deforestation. The Governments should endeavor to put measures in place to control, the indiscriminate manufacture of instruments which yield pollutant gases. In some cases, the redundant oil is allowed to pour into the rivers, lakes and oceans, there by depleting aquatic species. Humanity has abdicated its responsibility to co-exist and supervise ecology. World bodies associated with the United Nations should forge ahead and advocate against ecological pollution.

This chapter encourages humanity to develop a spirit of harmonious co-existence and stewardship as bestowed upon it by God in Genesis 1:26. The prophetic voice of the church may be the best remedy because the church has the potential to influence its members to react positively to the call of conventions to protect and conserve the ecosystem.

When God said "let us make a man in our image... and let them rule over the whole creation" (Genesis 1:26), God's instruction to rule did not mean abuse or interference into the smooth co-existence between nature and humanity. It meant humanity's duty to co-exist safely with nature, supervise the preservation of nature and to nurture nature towards prosperity.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the ecological problems born out of a traditional biblical hermeneutic that has often been merged with anthropocentricism, colonial mentality and environmental devastation. Industrialisation, the maiming of landscapes, looting of natural resources, pollution of water bodies, tearing of the ozone layer, global warming, climate change and other destructive human activities and consequences have ensured that the story of the ecosystem is gloomy.

Pauline green theology should have been the one to turn to in this New Testament age. That is because Paul's comments on any topic in the New Testament are likely to be the most wide-spread and significant since they are from the largest corpus by any single author in the Bible.

Instead of humanity being Mother Earth's worst enemy, scholars, activists and theologians in the quest for saving the environment are proposing different solutions to the environmental catastrophe. Some are proposing green theologies, a prophetic voice from the church community and direct physical environmental intervention. Nonetheless, they have generally dismissed the perception that nature exists to entertain and serve humanity. This perspective correctly says that human beings must co-exist with the rest of the Earth community in harmony and mutual preservation. Those with a more moderate view say that since God created humanity to be the leader over creation, humanity should lead with a mindset of stewardship, responsible supervision and nurture. The chapter covered the following sections: The Problem and its Christian Roots, Paul's Theology of the Environment, The Bible in Nature – Nature in the Bible, The Solution: Science and Christology, and A Prophetic Voice for Stewardship.

Reference

Carling, R.C.J. (2005). *A Christian Approach to the Environment*. The John Ray .Initiative, United Kingdom. vol. 16. No.3. July/September, 1999. London.

Department for the Study of Religions. *A Christian Approach to the Environment*. University of Ghana. Ghana Bulletin of Theology, New Series, vol. 3 December, 2008.

Erickson, Millard J. (2001) *Introducing Christian Doctrine*. Baker Academic. Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Federal Environmental Agency – Austria (1994) *State of the Environment in Austria*. Styria, Graz.

Life Application Study Bible (1997). Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Lockyer, Herbert, sr. ed. (1986). *Illustrated Dictionary of The Bible*. Thomas Nelson Publishers. United States of America.

Saunders, Trevor J. (1992). *Aristotle The Politics*. Clays Ltd., St Ives plc, England.

UNCHS(Habitat) *Implementing the Urban Environment* Agenda vol 1. Majestic Printing Works, Kenya, Nairobi.

Viljoen, Francois P. ed. *New Testament Study Guide for NTES 111 PEC* The Platinum Press North-West University, Republic of South Africa, Potchefstroom Campus.

BiAS 29

Afterword

Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Biblical Imagination

X. Mother Earth, Gender and Biblical Imagination

Musa W. Dube

> God, the unique source of all creation makes all that exists sacred. In African Religion, God is present to and in more than human beings. Creation and other beings are the ambit of God. This theocentricism is the beginning of women's ecotheology. Most African women live close to nature; we are in touch with our rural economies and cultures and, therefore, with the ethic and spirituality of our primal religion which requires us to be sensitive to both the visible and invisible world as domains with God.
>
> (Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theologies*, 2001:46)

Storytelling: Mother Earth and the Woman

According to Genesis 2, God creates a man from dust, places him in a garden and brings every animal to him to be named by him. Whatever he names an animal that is what it becomes. God realises that a man is still lonely. God sends the man to sleep and creates a woman from him and for him. A woman is brought to him for naming. He names her and happily declares her the bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, for she was created from him. Together, they live happily in the garden of Eden, eating from the garden and taking care of the garden. Things take a huge change when a woman listens to a snake, eating the fruit in the middle of the garden. Consequently, human beings are taken out of God's garden and the ground/Earth is cursed due to a woman's sin. The harmonious co-existence of human beings with nature is thus broken, supposedly because of a woman's desire to have wisdom and collaboration with an animal, a snake. From

henceforth, humanity, and possibly the Earth, needs salvation, because a woman (Eve) was tempted by the snake and succumbed to its tricks (Genesis 2 & 1 Tim 2).

The subjugation of women and the Earth thus undergirds Christian/biblical understanding of salvation, for at the centre of its theological imagination is patriarchy and anthropocentricism. While patriarchy is a male-centred ideology that empowers the male sex in economic, social, cultural and political structures (Dube 2016:144-154), anthropocentricism, on the other hand is philosophy that believes human beings are the most important members of the Earth and that all that is in the Earth was created for the endless enjoyment of human beings (Habel 2010:114-125). Yet we still need to ask: What are some Earth-friendly aspects of Genesis 2 and other biblical texts? Can women subscribe to a concept of salvation that is patriarchal and anthropocentric, without subscribing to their own oppression? (Eaton 2000:54-71). How can sin be re-named and re-imagined? How can religious salvation be re-imagined to liberate to the whole creation community? (Kinoti 2006; Rhoads and Rossing 2010:128-143**;** Habel 2010:114-125). How do other religions imagine the Earth community, gender and salvation? These are some of the questions that scholars contributing to this volume and using different theories and methods were invited to interrogate, theologise and to recommend useable interpretations to their faith communities in the quest for a healthy and liberating relationship with the Earth community especially in the context of contemporary global environmental crisis.

Defining the Problem: Gender and Global Environmental Crisis

As the Sustainable Development Goals (henceforth SDGs) underline: "*there is no country in the world that is not experiencing first hand drastic effects of climate change. Greenhouse emissions continue to rise, and are now 50% higher than their 1990 level*" (2016:13). (Emphasis added.) Indeed, research is increasingly showing that while global warming is

undoubtedly an unfolding tragedy for all of us, indications are that the poor members of our communities will become even poorer (McFague 2008:22).[1] *SADC Gender Protocol 2012 Barometer*, points out that "While climate change affects everyone, it does not affect everyone equally. The poor and the vulnerable in Africa and other developing countries... suffer the most as they experience violence, exclusion and loss of sovereignty over natural resources. Women make up 70% of those the worlds' poor and this places them on the frontline of coping with disproportionate climate impacts. Of the people who die in the climate-induced natural disasters 85% are women, while 75% of environmental refugees are women" (2012:342). Similarly, *SADC Gender Protocol 2018 Barometer* points out that

> Women and girls constitute the majority of those impacted by the effects of climate change and environmental degradation... Along with the projected reduction in rainfall and increase in temperatures across large parts of the region, experts expect climate change will significantly affect productivity in the agricultural sector... climate change therefore presents a serious threat to food security and livelihoods, particularly among the poor segments of the population in the rural areas. Whilst women own less than 10% of land, they are key managers of the land (2018:23).

In various ways, the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight Earth crisis and call for Earth Care. Formulated in 2016, SGDs "are universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity." According to SDG goal 15,

> Human and Other animals rely on other forms of life on land for food, clean air, clean water, and as means of combating climate change. Plant life makes up to 80% of Human diet. Forests, which cover 30% of the Earth's surface, help to keep the air and water clean and the Earth's climate in balance...Yet the land and life on it are in trouble. Arable land is disappearing 30-35 times faster than it has historically. Deserts are spreading. Animal breeds are going extinct. We can turn the trends around.

---

[1] Sally Mcfague, A New Climate for Theology, 22.

SDG goal number one, whose mandate is to "end poverty in all its forms everywhere," observes that "gender inequality plays a large part in perpetuating poverty and its risks" while pointing out "that the threats brought by climate change, conflict and food insecurity mean even more work is needed to bring people out of poverty" (SDG 1). Given these global, continental and localised challenges the *Africa Agenda 2063* pledges that, "Africa will participate in global efforts for climate change mitigation that support and broaden the policy space for sustainable development on the continent" (Africa Agenda 2063). This volume on *Mother Earth Mother Africa and Biblical Imagination,* seeks to participate in these conversations, concerns and to generate solutions both at global and specific African contexts, by interrogating religious/cultural/theological and philosophical resources for their constructions and imaginations of the Earth; by interrogating their impact, usability and need for re-imagination and re-interpretation, where necessary.

This book seeks to interrogate the intersection of gender and other social categories with the construction of the Earth in various biblical texts. This undertaking is crucial for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, an Africa wide association of scholars, whose mandate is to analyse all religious and cultural traditions for their constructions of gender and how it impacts the lives of women as well as to re-interpret them for the empowerment of women and their communities. Needless to say climate change has and will continue to have a major impact on African women, who depend on the land and subsistence farming to feed their families and children. When rains fail, not only women find their workload doubled as they have to walk longer distance to fetch waters, food security is also highly impacted, leading to ill-health and death (Oduyoye 2001:46-50, 96-100). Environmental health is central to African women and their communities' wellbeing, hence the significance of this book in order to inform and train faith-based organisations on the demands such a context will lay on mission and pastoral care.

Academically, it is particularly crucial to undertake this research project since a recent analysis of African theological scholars, and African women scholars of religion/culture/theology and philosophy in particular, noted that, "What does Christian Environmental thought look

like in Africa? We wish we could show more of it. Searching, for example, through recent publications of leading scholars in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians—some of the most socially attuned and reformed-minded theologians of the continent—turned up no relevant texts" (Carpenter & Kooistra 2013:81-82).[2]

This volume, together with six other volumes[3] undertaken by African women theologians, is a major step towards attending to this gap.

Mother Earth: Religion, Colonialism, Global Commerce and Technology

In his 1967 now classic article, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," Lynn White discredits and credits religious/cultural beliefs regarding the environmental sustainability. First, he identifies some biblical texts and Christian religion as anthropocentric, giving human beings dominion over nature, thereby sanctioning the exploitation

---

[2] The evaluation was harsh and pronounced hastily because Mercy Oduyoye's work has always explicitly mainstreamed environmental concerns. This is evident, *Introducing African Women's Theology*. New York: Orbis Press, 2001, 46-50, 96-100. Besides, the fact that Musa W. Dube postcolonial approach centres the Earth and the taking of it from the indigenous people and the destruction of their Earth-friendly beliefs, she has published two Earth-centred papers prior to this hasty evaluation, which was obviously not thorough in its research before passing judgement. These include: Dube, M. W. "Inhabiting God's Garden: Are We in the Global Village or in God's Garden?" *Ministerial Formation 96.* (2002): 31-37 and Dube, Musa W. "And God Saw that it was Good! An Earth-Friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1," *Black Theology Vol.13/3* (2015):1-17.

[3] The volumes emanate from the July 1-4, 2019 Circle of Concerned African Women Conference, which was the 30th anniversary and which also focused on the theme of Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Religious Imagination. Two volumes are already published (*Theologisches Afrika, in FAMA Feministisch Politisch Theologisch* 2019 Volume 4 and Nobuntu Penxa-Matholeni, et al. *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions*. Cape Town: Sun Press Media, 2020) while the rest are still forthcoming.

and destruction of our ecological systems. He points to Genesis 1:26-27, where God supposedly blessed human beings and gave them the right to have dominion over the Earth and over all living things, in addition to the injunction to multiply and fill the Earth. People of biblical faith and cultures have thus believed human beings to be the most important creatures over all other members of the creation community, argues White. Moreover, he maintains that human beings have felt entitled to use the Earth recklessly and exploitatively given the religious belief that they have been given "dominion over the Earth and over all other living beings."

With the advance of western science, technology and modern colonialism, White asserts that the anthropocentric perspectives of the Biblical faith were given precedence over native cultural beliefs, which often held that every member of the creation community, animate and inanimate, had a divine spirit. In such beliefs, mountains, forests, trees and all animals were held to have divine identity. Consequently, those who sought to kill an animal or to cut a tree, for example, had to seek the divine permission to hunt and eat any animal, often characterised by praying at the feet of a killed animal thus seeking divine permission to eat it. White holds such native/primitive beliefs associated divinity with all members of creation and restrained human beings from believing themselves to be above all members of creation and having the right to recklessly use resources of the Earth. In this argument, White highlights that religious/cultural beliefs can be both detriment and positive towards environmental sustainability—calling for analysis, re-reading and retrieving of our texts for environmental sustainability.

According to White, modern western colonialism and its accompanying Christianisation of the world had tragic impact on the Earth, in the sense that native religious/cultural beliefs that were Earth-Friendly were suppressed through the promotion of biblical beliefs over indigenous beliefs. Modern colonisation itself was violence over the Earth, for as Edward Said maintains, it did not only cover 85% of the Earth, it also involved the taking of the Earth from those whose noses are flatter and those whose colours are darker (1992). Such taking of the Earth from the other, in Modern colonialism, was in itself an environmental oppression, since natives were often moved from their fertile lands and fair settlements into some crowded and arid

areas (Dube 2014:139-156). Native lands were also subjected to commercial needs of the colonisers, with massive chunks of land cleared for the masters' plantations, thereby destroying ecological systems. The process led to overcrowding for some areas; destruction of some species; massive removal of trees; stress on ecological systems as well as pollution of the environment through farm chemicals, among others. Unfortunately, the Christian mission, accompanying modern colonialism regarded itself as a mission to save the lost souls (Matt 28:16-20) than a mission to the whole creation as proposed by Mark 16:5 (Rhoads 2005:165-184 & Habel 2010:114-125). The modern Christian mission understood its mandate as to free indigenous people from their religions, cultures and practices, which more often than not, recognised the sanctity of all members of the creation community (Young 2015:168-171).

To subdue the Earth through colonialism and Christianity was also a gendered approach, that often regarded the Earth and the targeted countries as females, who had to be entered and dominated. This oppression of the land translated into oppressing of women, who through their priestly roles were often overseers of rituals of honoring and respecting the Earth. Through their traditional role as farmers, herbalists, water and fire keepers, African women had a closer relationship with the land. The taking of the land from them through colonialism and the religious/cultural dispossession often translated into disempowerment of African women. This is documented by the anthropological work of Ife Amadiume (1987) in West Africa and Jean John Commaroff in Southern Africa (1997).

The destruction of the Earth by dualistic and hierarchical western religious/cultural/theological philosophical thoughts, colonialism and concepts of development have now reached worldwide proportions, affecting the whole Earth as described above. African scholars and women thus need to interrogate both indigenous and received traditions for how they construct the Earth and gender, with the intent to understand, analyse, re-construct, reimagine and re-use where necessary and helpful. Such an effort will involve, exploration of African, biblical, theological World Religions and philosophical perspectives

of Earth and gender in order to retrieve, analyse, re-imagine and reconstruct cultural/religious and philosophical tradition to address contemporary environmental crisis.

Liberation of the Earth and the Oppressed

Leonardo Boff, a liberation theologian, has insisted that the cry of the poor is interlinked with the cry of the Earth (2012). In so doing, Boff underlines that the oppression of people is often, if not always, linked to the oppression of the Earth. He intersects environmental crisis with class oppression (Bouma- Prediger 2004). Since liberation theology bids us to be in solidarity with the oppressed, to hear their voices and to take their sides, recognising the Earth as oppressed, bids us to take sides with the Earth in our various liberation theologies. A liberation theology that focuses on human beings without taking cognisance of the oppression of the Earth, cannot be a liberation theology, for it embraces the oppression of the Other, Mother Earth. Liberation theology, of any form that sidelines the Earth is ultimately not a liberation theology, for it functions with capitalism, neo-liberialism, patriarchy, anthropocentricism, hierarchy and dualistic views that imagines salvation/liberation as human-centred, partial and inadequate.

It follows that justice, mission, salvation, gender relations and ecclesiology must be re-imagined in the context of global environmental crisis. Worship that does not only include a congregation of human beings, but admits into its gathering the whole creation calls into being new Faith-Based Communities and new theologies (Habel 2010:114-125). What does it mean to do mission? (Rhoads & Rossing 2010:128-143) What is salvation? How is the Divine/God imagined in the Creation community? How should gender relations be imagined? What is hospitality, given the number of people who will (are) be displaced by climate change? How should we theologise from the angle of inevitable migration and induced poverty? How else should we reimagine the concept of being a people of faith in this age of globalisation of climate change and global displacement? How should we

re/read scriptures/texts in the light of global environmental crisis? How can Earth-friendly manuals be produced for faith communities and their leaders? Clearly, theological/religious/cultural/philosophical thinking needs to disavow patriarchal and anthropocentric perspectives, expressed by global economic systems that are exploitative, to re-imagine a new Earth community of being; namely the whole creation community gathering and living in full acknowledgement and respect of its Creator and one another.

Statement of the Problem

Whereas global environmental crisis are linked to gender oppression and are threatening the future of life on Earth, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, whose agenda is to research religious/cultural/philosophical traditions for gender construction and to reimagine these sources from a perspective that empowers women and all members of the Earth Community, has not yet carried a continent wide research, through its members, to interrogate how the Earth is imagined in cultural/religious/theological/philosophical sources and how such perspectives might still be user-friendly for today's crisis, or require re-margination//re-interpretation from a sustainable development perspectives. Through its Africa wide membership, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians seeks to carry out a continent-wide research project to investigate how the Earth is constructed in cultural/ religious/ theological/ philoso-phical traditions in order to analyze their relevance to the contemporary environmental crisis at local and global stage as well as to re-imagine and re-interpret available perspectives in the light of contemporary environmental crisis. Outputs of the project can provide Earth-friendly perspectives for empowering Faith-Based Communities and leaders to effectively address contemporary environmental crisis within their congregations and larger society. This volume on Mother Earth, Mother Africa and the Bible falls within this wider agenda of the Circle, which will be carried out for the next five years (2019-2024).

Specific Objectives:
This thematic research project of the Circle seeks to:

1. Highlight global, continental and local impact of environ-mental crisis on African women and the communities
2. Highlight the link between Earth and gender oppression at global, continental and local contexts
3. Investigate how the Earth is imagined in cultural/ religious/theological and Philosophical resources
4. Analyze the usability of perspectives provided by cultural/ religious/theological and Philosophical resources
5. Re-imagine and re-interpret perspectives provided by cultural/ religious/theological and Philosophical resources in the light of contemporary environmental crisis
6. Design Earth-friendly interpretative frameworks for faith-communities and leaders to address contemporary environ-mental crisis
7. Use new frameworks to train religious communities on Earth-friendly ways of relating with the Earth

Research Questions

1. How are African women impacted by contemporary environmental crisis in my region, country and globally?
2. What is the Link between gender and Earth oppression in a particular context and faith tradition?
3. How is the Earth conceptualised in African cultural/ religious/theological and philosophical thinking?
4. Does the analysis of the African cultural/religious/theological and philosophical perspectives of the Earth and gender yield

user-friendly concepts for today's policy makers and environmental challenges?

5. How can we re-interpret or re-imagine some African cultural/religious/theological and philosophical perspectives on gender and the Earth for the liberation of the creation community?
6. How can we design Earth-friendly interpretative frameworks that empowers Faith-based organisations to be socially engaged in addressing environmental crisis within their congregations and communities?

The above objectives and research questions are undertaken on the assumption that cultural, religious, theological and philosophical traditions have influential perspectives and attitudes about Earth-keeping that needs to be fully investigated, understood, evaluated, re-interpreted/re-imagined for application to address the contemporary global environmental crisis.

Methodology

Following the tradition of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, the chosen theme is to be approached by its continent wide and diaspora members, from their particular areas of specialisation and contexts. Members first in a Pan African conference to share and discuss their findings and thereafter disperse to their respective regions, countries and institution, where they continue to research on the agreed theme from various religious perspectives. That is, scholars of African Indigenous Religions, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, the Bible, Ethics, etc. are expected to:

1. Describe their local, regionally and globally contexts, highlighting gender, class, ethnic and Earth intersections
2. Choose the most appropriate theories and apply them for analysis of their particular traditions and texts
3. Those who choose to carry out fieldwork to collect data, would decide to either use qualitative or quantitative methods

4. (Texts-based scholars would) apply hermeneutically-appropriate methods of their choice for reading, analysis and re-imagination
5. Generate new methods and theories from their contexts, texts and data
6. Submit their developed papers to the research leaders of their particular areas for consideration
7. Receive feedback from reviewers, for upgrading the paper for final submission to editor/leader of the sub-theme

This volume seeks to address the above stated theme, contexts, objectives and research questions from the perspective of biblical studies. Contributors utilise various theories, methods and African cultures to generate readings that assist us to address contemporary Earth crisis. This, however, is the beginning of a journey in conversation with the worldwide scholars of the Bible, environment and gender.

References

African Union Commission: *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*. Addis Abba: African Union, 2015.

Amadiumbe, Ifi. (1987). *Male Daughters, Female Husband: Gender and Sex in an African Society African Society*. London: Zed Books, 1987.

Boff, Leonardo. (1997). *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. New York: Orbis Books, 1997.

Bouma-Prediger, Steven. "Environmental Racism," pp.281-288. in Miguel A. de La Torre, eds. *Handbook of US Theologies of Liberation*. St Louis: Chalice Press, 2004.

Carpenter, Joel & Nellie Kooistra. *Engaging Africa* Nagel Institute, 2013: 81-82.

Comaroff, Jean and Comaroff, John. Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity in a South African Frontier, Vol.2. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Dube, Musa W. (2016). "Gender in African Christianity," pp. 144-154. in Isabel A. Phiri, eds *Anthology of African Christianity,"* Geneva: WCC.

Dube, Musa W. "And God Saw that it was Good! An Earth-Friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1," *Black Theology Vol.13/3* (2015):1-17.

Dube, Musa W. "Boundaries and Bridges: Journeys of a Postcolonial Feminist Biblical Scholar," *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 22 (2014): 139-156.

Dube, Musa W. "Inhabiting God's Garden: Are We in the Global Village or in God's Garden?" *Ministerial Formation 96.* 2002:13-37.

Eaton, Heather. "Ecofeminist Contributions to an Ecojustice Hermeneutics." In Norman Habel ed. *Reading from the Perspective of Earth,* 54-71. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

Habel, Norman. "Earth Mission: The third Mission of the Church," *Currents in Theology and Mission 37*: April 2010: 114-125.

Gender Links. *Barometer: SADC Gender Protocol 2018*. Johannesburg: Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance, 2018.

Gender Links. *Barometer: SADC Gender Protocol 2012*. Johannesburg: Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance, 2012.

Hallman, D. G. *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*. New York Orbis Press, 1994.

Kistner Wolfram. "Koinonia: The Church Creating Community." In M. Guma. & L. A. Milton, eds. *An African Challenge to the Church in the 21st Century,* 133-146. Cape Town: Salty Print, 1997.

Kinoti, George, "Christians and the Environment." In Tokunoh Adeyemo eds. *Africa Bible Commentary,* 616. Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006.

McFague, Sally. A New Climate for Theology; God the World, and Global Warming. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.

Oduyoye, Mercy. A. Introducing African Women Theology. Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 2001.

Rhoads, David and Barbara Rossing. "A Beloved Earth Community: Christian Mission in an Ecological Age" pp. 128-143. In Edmund Kee-Fook Chia eds, *Mission After Chritendom: Emergent Themes in Contemporary Mission*. Louisville: John Knox, 2010

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992.

UNDP. *Sustainable Developmental Goals*. New York: United Nations, 2016.

WARC. The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth," Geneva: WARC, 2004.

White, Lynn "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," Science Magazine 1967, 1203-1207.

Young, Robert J. C. *Empire, Colony and Postcolony*. Sussex: Blackwell, 2015.

Notes on the Editors and Contributors

AIDOO, Mark S. (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in Old Testament at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana. He also serves as the Director for Research and Publications. His research interests are in the area of Hebrew poetry, African Spirituality, Leadership, Gender studies and Ecotheology. *E-mail: ms.aidoo@trinity.edu.gh*

BERMAN, Sidney K. (PhD) is the Pastor of Africa Evangelical Church in Gaborone, Botswana. He has published articles, chapters and books as well as edited journal volumes and books on the Old Testament, Hebrew Language, the Setswana Bible, translation studies, gender and contextual hermeneutics. *E-mail: sidneybrmn.sb@gmail.com*

DUBE, Musa W. (PhD) is a Professor for New Testament Studies at the University of Botswana, Department of Theology and Religious Studies. She published widely in the area of Contextual Biblical Studies, Gender and the Bible, HIV/AIDS, Bible in Africa Studies. Her influential work is internationally acknowledged and was honored with several high-ranking grants and awards, e.g. the German Alexander von Humboldt Foundation's F.W. Bessel Research Award. *E-mail: dubemw@mopipi.ub.bw*

DUNBAR, Ericka S. (PhD) is the Visiting Professor of Hebrew Bible at Payne Theological Seminary. She published in the area of Gender and the Bible and Africana Biblical Hermeneutics.
E-mail: edunbar@payneseminary.edu

KANYORO, Musimbi R.A. (PhD and D. Min) currently: is a member of the UN Global Compact Board; chairs two international boards, namely, the Women's Learning Partnerships (WLP) and the United World Colleges (UWC); serves as the Senior Advisor to "Together Gender Equality," a program of UN Global Compact; is a consultant for the UN Women "Generation Equality Faith Engagement Initiative," and; is the immediate past President and CEO of the Global Fund for Women. She has served in an advisory role on gender issues with the World Bank, UN Women, UNAIDS and various other Organizations and Initiatives. Dr. Kanyoro has been a visiting scholar of Hebrew and Old Testament Studies at Harvard Divinity School. For her scholarship and service, she has received numerous awards and

recognitions internationally. Additionally, Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro is a member of the Council of London School of Economics (LSE), a board member of Care International (CI) and a trustee of Homeward Bound (HB). *E-mail: musimbika@gmail.com*

KGALEMANG, Malebogo (MPhil) is a Senior Lecturer in New Testament and Gender Studies at the University of Botswana in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. Her publications are on intersections of the Bible, the African novel, Postcolonial and Feminist Theories, Botho/Ubuntu and gender. In addition, her research explores the relationship between the production of social (or cultural) meaning and their historical bearings on the shaping and sustenance of cultures of gender and its intersectionalities.
E-mail: mkgaleman@gmail.com

LESHOTA, Paul L. (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in Pastoral Therapy and Biblical Studies in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, at the National University of Lesotho. He has published articles, chapters in books on a wide range of topics including Postcolonial reading of the Bible, disability, HIV & AIDS, migration, gender and sexuality, transformative masculinities, ecology and folklore stories. His interests include teaching, research, research collaborations, networking, mentoring and curriculum review. *E-mail: paulleshota@gmail.com*

MOLATO, Kenosi is a researcher at SHINE Africa Project and a national director of Romans Project in Botswana. His research interests are ecological theologies, Atonement theology and Honour and shame studies. *E-mail: kenosimolato@gmail.com*

MÜLLER VAN VELDEN, Nina E. (PhD) is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the North-West University, South Africa, Faculty of Theology in the research focus area of Ancient Texts. Her current research and publications are focused on gender-critical readings of especially New Testament narratives, and dialoguing ancient understandings of gender and sexuality with contemporary contextual realities as they relate to gender. She completed her PhD (New Testament) at Stellenbosch University in 2018 with a dissertation titled, "When the lines are blurred: A gender-critical reading of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and John 13:1-17". *E-mail: ninamuller22@gmail.com*

PABALINGA, Seboifo M. (M.A.) is a PhD student in the area of Theology. She is an accredited lecturer in Life Insurance products.

YAFEH-DEIGH, Alice (Ph.D.) is a Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Azusa Pacific University, California, USA. Alice's wide-ranging research and writing interests include Greco-Roman Sexual Ethics, Cultural Hermeneutics, Feminist Hermeneutics, Postcolonial Hermeneutics, Disability Studies, and literary and rhetorical methods of biblical interpretation. *E-mail: ayafehdeigh@apu.edu*

BiAS at University of Bamberg Press

The book series **B**ible **i**n **A**frica **S**tudies (**BiAS**) was established in 2009 by Joachim Kügler, Lovemore Togarasei and Masiiwa Ragies Gunda.

All volumes of BiAS series are available online at:

- **http://www.uni-bamberg.de/ubp/verlagsprogramm/reihen/bible-in-africa-studies/** (information and overview of the series)
- **https://fis.uni-bamberg.de/cris/series/series00016/seriespublications.html** (download of the full texts)

We will always keep you updated if you follow us here:

- **http://uni-bamberg.academia.edu/BiasSeries** (information, additional texts, tables of matters, download links; pre-print versions)

***Editorial board** of BiAS volumes (and the sub-series ERA) from Volume 26 on:*

Kudzai **Biri** (*African Traditional Religions*)
Ezra **Chitando** (*World Christianity*)
Rosinah **Gabaitse** (*New Testament*)
Masiiwa R. **Gunda** (*Old Testament / Hebrew Bible*)
Joachim **Kügler** (*New Testament / Responsible for the contact with UBP*)
Johanna **Stiebert** (*Old Testament / Hebrew Bible*)
Lovemore **Togarasei** (*New Testament*)

Previously published volumes of the BiAS series

BiAS 1 **The Bible in Context**: Essay Collection / by Lovemore Togarasei, Bamberg: UBP, 2009
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus-2131

BiAS 2 **Reign with Him for Thousand Years (Rev 20:6)**:
A Socio-Hermeneutical Exposition of Biblical and Contemporary Millenarian Movements in Zimbabwe as Radical Responses to Deprivation / by David Bishau, Bamberg: UBP, 2010
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus-2457

BiAS 3 **The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe:**
A Socio-historical analysis of the political, cultural and Christian arguments in the homosexual public debate with special reference to the use of the Bible / by Masiiwa R. Gunda, Bamberg: UBP, 2010
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus-2522

BiAS 4 **From Text to Practice:** The role of the Bible in daily living of African people today / ed. by Joachim Kügler & Masiiwa R. Gunda, 2nd ed., rev. & expanded, Bamberg: UBP, 2013
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-20465

BiAS 5 **Pauvreté ou paupérisation en Afrique :** une étude exegético-ethique de la pauvreté chez les Beti-Fang du Cameroun / par Jacques F. Owono, Bamberg : UBP, 2011
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus-3259

BiAS 6 **Death and After-life Rituals in the eyes of the Shona:** Dialogue with Shona Customs with the Quest for Authentic Inculturation / by Canisius Mwandayi, Bamberg: UBP, 2011
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus-3336

BiAS 7 **The Bible and Politics in Africa** / ed. by Masiiwa R. Gunda & Joachim Kügler, Bamberg: UBP, 2012
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-4726

BiAS 8 **The Messianic Feeding of the Masses:** An Analysis of John 6 in the Context of Messianic Leadership in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe / by Francis Machingura, Bamberg: UBP, 2012
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus-4032

BiAS 9 **HIV/AIDS and the Bible in Tanzania:** A Contextual Re-reading of 2 Samuel 13:1-14:33 / by Mussa S. Muneja, Bamberg: UBP, 2012
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-9957

BiAS 10 Aluta continua biblical hermeneutics for liberation: Interpreting biblical texts on slavery for liberation of Zimbabwean underclasses / by Obvious Vengeyi, Bamberg: UBP, 2013
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-37641

BiAS 11 The Book of Ruth from a Lomwe perspective: ḥesed and ikharari / by Justino M. Alfredo, Bamberg: UBP, 2013
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-50966

BiAS 12 Prophets, profits and the Bible in Zimbabwe: Festschrift for Aynos M. Moyo / ed. by Ezra Chitando, Masiiwa R. Gunda & Joachim Kügler, Bamberg: UBP, 2013
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-55996

BiAS 13 Towards an African-Christian Environmental Ethic / by Nisbert T. Taringa, Bamberg: UBP, 2014
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-64812

BiAS 14 Beyond Making Money: The Prophetic Songs of Paul Dzampah from Ghana; Edition, Introduction, and Annotations / by Joachim Kügler, Bamberg: UBP, 2014
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-101753

BiAS 15 ERA 1 | Multiplying in the Spirit: African Initiated Churches in Zimbabwe / ed. by Ezra Chitando, Masiiwa R. Gunda & Joachim Kügler, Bamberg: UBP, 2014
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-105096

BiAS 16 Analysing the Frames of a Bible: The Case of the Setswana Translations of the Book of Ruth / by Sidney K. Berman, Bamberg: UBP, 2014
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-250198

BiAS 17 The Bible and Children in Africa / Lovemore Togarasei & Joachim Kügler (eds.), Bamberg: UBP, 2014
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-252876

BiAS 18 On the Public Role of the Bible in Zimbabwe: Unpacking Banana's "re-writing" call for a socially and contextually relevant Biblical Studies / by Masiiwa R. Gunda, Bamberg: UBP, 2015
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-255608

BiAS 19 Offering the Gospel ADAPANON: An interpretation and application of 1 Corinthians 9:18 / by Johannes M. Wessels / Ed. & provided with a foreword by Joachim Kügler, Bamberg: UBP, 2015
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-264687

BiAS 20 The Bible and Violence in Africa: Papers presented at the BiAS meeting 2014 in Windhoek (Namibia), with some additional contributions / Johannes Hunter & Joachim Kügler (eds.), Bamberg: UBP, 2016
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus4-461656

BiAS 21 At the Crossroads: A Call to Christians to Act in Faith for an Alternative Zimbabwe / by Masiiwa R. Gunda, Bamberg: UBP, 2018
https://doi.org/10.20378/irbo-53039

BiAS 22 The Bible and Gender Troubles in Africa: Papers presented at the BiAS meeting 2016 in Harare (Zimbabwe) with some additional contributions / Joachim Kügler, Rosinah Gabaitse, Johanna Stiebert (eds.), Bamberg: UBP, 2019
https://doi.org/10.20378/irbo-54678

BiAS 23 ERA 2 | Abundant Life and Basic Needs: African Religions as a Resource for Sustainable Development / by Bednicho Nyoni, Bamberg: UBP, 2019
https://doi.org/10.20378/irbo-54768

BiAS 24 ERA 3 | African Pentecostalism, the Bible, and Cultural Resilience: The Case of the ZAOGA / by Kudzai Biri, Bamberg: UBP, 2020
http://doi.org/10.20378/irb-47003

BiAS 25 ERA 4 | Religion and Development in Africa / Ezra Chitando, Masiiwa Ragies Gunda & Lovemore Togarasei (eds.) in cooperation with Joachim Kügler, Bamberg: UBP, 2020
https://doi.org/10.20378/irb-47759

BiAS 26 ERA 5 | Religion and Social Marginalization in Zimbabwe / Lovemore Togarasei, David Bishau & Ezra Chitando (eds.), Bamberg: UBP, 2020
https://doi.org/10.20378/irb-47836

BiAS 27 Witwen und Bibel in Tansania: Eine leserinnenorientierte Lektüre von 1 Tim 5,3-16 / by Stefanie Beck, Bamberg: UBP, 2020
https://doi.org/10.20378/irb-48219

BiAS 28 ERA 6 | "The wounded Beast?": Single Women, Tradition, and the Bible in Zimbabwe / by Kudzi Biri: UBP, 2021
https://doi.org/10.20378/irb-48992

University
of Bamberg
Press

Climate change and its global impact are the biggest crisis of our time – especially for the marginalized communities. Both the Earth and Africa have been identified with the adjective "Mother." This gender identity tells tales in patriarchal and imperial worlds that use the female gender to signal legitimation of oppression and exploitation. In this volume, African women theologians and their female-identifying colleagues struggle with reading and interpreting religious texts in the context of environmental crisis that are threatening life on Earth. The chapters interrogate how Biblical texts and African cultural resources imagine the Earth and our relationship with the Earth: Do these texts offer windows of hope for re-imagining liberating relationship with the Earth? How do they intersect with gender, race, empire, ethnicity and sexuality, among others? Beginning with Genesis, journeying through Exodus, Ruth, Ecclesiastes and the Gospel of John, the authors seek to read in solidarity with the Earth for the healing of the whole Earth community.

The editors and authors

AIDOO, Mark S. (Ghana) / BERMAN, Sidney K. (Botswana) / DUBE, Musa W. (Botswana) / DUNBAR, Ericka S. (USA) / KANYORO, Musimbi R.A. (Kenya) / KGALEMANG, Malebogo (Botswana) / LESHOTA, Paul L. (Lesotho) / MOLATO, Kenosi (Botswana) / MÜLLER VAN VELDEN, Nina E. (South Africa) / PABALINGA, Seboifo M. (Botswana) / YAFEH-DEIGH, Alice (USA)

ISBN: 978-3-86309-788-2

www.uni-bamberg.de/ubp