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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, anthropocentrism, 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 by-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 Greek word *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 anthropocentrism, 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.

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