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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,

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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 though 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 Earth³, heavens⁴, 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 pronouncement 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

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- 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, anthropocentrism 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 Anthropocentrism 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 anthropocentrism 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: Saly 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 anthropocentrism 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 Asshoto 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 opposite²⁰ (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 heaven²¹ (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 four³⁶ 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 interpretation 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 serenity, 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 people 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 Louis: 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.

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