

Leshota, Paul L.

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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 amidst 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 strife 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 chiasitic 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 is 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 River², 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 Levi³ 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.

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