Law, Religion and the Environment in Africa

Edited by
M. Christian Green
Muhammed Haron

2 “DO NOT POLLUTE THE LAND WHERE YOU ARE”: HEBREW BIBLE TEACHING ON ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Mmapula Diana Kebaneilwe¹

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, scholars have indicated the increasing importance of the Bible as a resource for environmental conservation. Preaching a sermon on what the Bible says about the environment, however, is not commonplace. Bible-believing communities have neglected the beautifully crafted teachings and laws on environmental care, most notably the one in Numbers 35:33, which insists that the land should not be polluted. In this chapter, I explore from an ecological perspective, biblical passages that highlight environmental issues and expose the ideal and desired relationship between humanity and the entire created world. The biblical text provides a rich literary world from which humanity can tap knowledge about environmental conservation; hence, it is imperative that readers and scholars of the Bible return to its pages in search of solutions to the impending ecological crisis that haunts the global community. After all, the Bible exerts substantial influence on peoples, cultures and modes of thoughts the world over.²

Today, the world is threatened by global warming and its effect on human existence, hence the importance of finding sustainable means and ways of halting or even reversing such effects. The Bible offers hope in that regard and calls for a reassessment of human actions and activities. There are laws and statutes in the Bible that can be adopted and adapted to address contemporary ecological issues and help humanity preserve the environment and in turn safeguard their own survival in the world. We need to exercise caution, however, as the Bible contains competing and, worse still, contradictory discourses on the issue of environmental conservation.

In this chapter, I endeavour to explore this ambiguity with the aim of showing that while the cautions may apply, it is important to consider biblical discourses that are affirmative of the environment and use them to educate ourselves for the preservation of our world. At the end of the day, we who are alive today, in the twenty-first century, are faced with the agency to save our world if it is to sustain us and our later generations in the long run. Accordingly, this chapter provides background on the current status of the environment in the context of global concerns. It examines ecotheological theory and method as a particularly valuable

1 Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies, University of Botswana.

2 Kebaneilwe MD. 2016. “Disability as a Challenge and not a Crisis: the Jesus Model”, *Journal of Disability and Religion* 20(1-2):93-102 [<https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2016.1152939>].

theoretical framework for reading the biblical texts. It provides a synopsis of biblical teachings on environmental care and sustainability. Finally, it offers some critical conclusions regarding the biblical teachings and implications for environmental sustainability.

THE STATUS OF OUR ENVIRONMENT TODAY

It has been observed above that the twenty-first century inhabitants of the world are threatened with a looming ecological crisis and possible collapse of the planet earth.³ Many will agree that there is general panic arising from the obvious and visible ecological decline of our world. This has prompted governments around the world to make efforts to design policies on environmental conservation, and concerted efforts have been made towards the reduction of greenhouse emissions.⁴ These are emissions resulting from energy use, such as carbon dioxide produced by the burning of fossil fuels, methane and nitrous oxide in the course of multiple human activities.⁵ Such activities result in pollution, land degradation, destruction of the ozone layer, animal species depletion and deforestation.⁶ Research shows that human activities have contributed immensely to the phenomenon of climate change, the effects of which are a global concern with particular threat to the sustainability of livelihoods of especially populations in developing countries.⁷

As observed by environmental scholar Lucjan Pawlowski, the current ecological crisis is a result of the rapid technical and technological developments which have given modern people immense power to transform the world virtually to an unlimited degree, including its destruction.⁸ The point is that global warming is a reality. It is being felt across the globe in tangible ways, such as extremes of temperature and precipitation, which in turn affect water supply and quality. It also changes the amounts of seasonal and perennial snow, rainfall, ice cover and sea levels.⁹ These are a result of atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide and have adverse implications for human health and other species survival.

In discussing the state of the planet, Thomas Karl, a climate scientist, and his colleagues, insists on the effects of economic growth as one of the factors affecting

3 Kebaneilwe MD. 2016. "Law, Religion and Ecological Issues: A Theological Approach", in Coertzen P, Green MC and Hansen L (eds). *Religious Freedom and Religious Pluralism in Africa-Prospects and Limitations*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 257-268.

4 Kebaneilwe, "Law, Religion and Ecological Issues", 257.

5 Karl TR and Trenberth KE. 2003. "Modern Global Climate Change", *Science* 302(5651): 1719-1723 [<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1090228>].

6 Karl and Trenberth, "Modern Global Climate Change", 1721.

7 Mwiturubani DA and van Wyk J. 2010. "Climate Change and Natural Resources Conflicts in Africa", *Institute for Security Studies Monograph* 170:261.

8 Pawlowski L. 2015. "Where Is the World Heading? Social Crisis Created by Promotion of Biofuels and Nowadays Liberal Capitalism". *Rocznik Ochrona Środowiska* [Yearbook of Environmental Protection] 17(1):26-39.

9 Karl and Trenberth, "Modern Global Climate Change", 1719.

2. "Do not pollute the land where you are"

global air quality. Karl and his research colleagues further observe that megacities or metropolitan areas with over 10 million inhabitants are major contributors of regional and global pollution.¹⁰ Continuing industrialisation, migration to urban areas, as well as increasing world population are also mentioned as more sources of air pollution.¹¹ It is significant that climate change is dominated by human activities. These human-induced atmospheric changes, in turn, are adversely affecting the entire natural world and causing uncertainty regarding the sustainability of human, animal and plant life on the earth.¹² As Karl and his colleagues further note, the effects are felt in tangible ways, such that "we are venturing into the unknown with climate and the associated impacts could be quite disruptive".¹³

Another study has indicated that "over the past 100 years, global average temperature has increased by approximately 0.6 degrees Celsius and is projected to continue to rise at a rapid rate".¹⁴ The study insists that, while species have responded to climatic changes throughout history, there is a rising concern for wild species and their ecosystems, given the rate at which the climate continues to change.¹⁵ Importantly, the same study suggests that "rapid temperature rise and other stresses, in particular habitat destruction, could easily disrupt the inter-connectedness among species and lead to a reformation of species communities ... and possible extinctions".¹⁶ These are disturbing findings, and they further indicate the need for more concerted efforts to address ecological issues head-on. We, the citizens of the world today, can no longer afford to point fingers at others, nor can we turn a blind eye to the impending ecological crisis. Instead, each of us needs, from our own corner, do something towards finding sustainable means to curb or halt any further damage to our environment. Our lives and those of all of creation, animate and inanimate are at stake.

My suggestion in this chapter is that the Bible contains some important teachings on ecological care and conservation that need to be explored at all levels and in all directions in our search for answers to save our Mother Earth. Research done across the world by religious environmentalists and scholars show that, even as contemporary peoples, we can learn a lot from ancient religious texts (including the Bible) on most human existential issues including the sustainability environmental concerns facing our world. For instance, biblical scholars and theologians have over the years embarked on studies in ecotheology from different perspectives

10 Karl and Trenberth, "Modern Global Climate Change", 1719.

11 Karl and Trenberth, "Modern Global Climate Change", 1719.

12 Karl and Trenberth, "Modern Global Climate Change", 1719.

13 Karl and Trenberth, "Modern Global Climate Change", 1719.

14 Root TL, Price JT, Hall KR et al. 2003. "Fingerprints of Global Warming on Wild Animals and Plants", *Nature* 421(6918):57-60 [<https://doi.org/10.1038/nature01333>], citing Baldo MA, O'Brien DF, You Y et al. 1998. "Highly Efficient Phosphorescent Emission from Organic Electroluminescent Devices", *Nature* 395:151-154 [<https://doi.org/10.1038/25954>].

15 Root et al., "Fingerprints of Global Warming", 57.

16 Root et al., "Fingerprints of Global Warming", 57.

including Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Gaia and God* and *Women Healing Earth*, Norman Habel's *The Earth Bible Project*, Whitney Bauman's *Theology, Creation and Environmental Ethics*¹⁷ and many others. Continuing the same slant, ecotheologian Ryan McLaughlin asserts that: "In the face of an ever-growing recognition regarding the validity of ecological issues, many religious scholars have turned to voices in the Christian narrative to widen ethical concern for the nonhuman creation."¹⁸

The significance of the above works and numerous others done about ecotheology cannot be understated; thus, this chapter seeks to highlight the need for further reflection on the Bible's ecological lessons by way of an overview of the biblical teachings on the issue. The goal of this exercise is to underscore those scriptures that directly speak to humanity's mandate to care for and nurture the world around them, rather than cause destruction. What exactly does the Bible say about the environment including animals and trees and what is our position in relation to all those? Examples will be drawn from both the outrightly affirmative texts, as well as those which are seemingly negative or ambiguous. These texts will be critically explored with ecotheological lenses to enable them to positively impact the issue at hand, namely, the ecological crisis of our century.

ECOTHEOLOGICAL THEORY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lawrence Troster, an ecotheologian, maintains that despite the many exponents of ecotheology, it is difficult to pin it down to one clear definition.¹⁹ Troster further posits that ecotheology refers to the entire household of God's creation as an interrelated system that encompasses all of nature, taking seriously the well-being of life as a whole.²⁰ He maintains, further, that he understands ecotheology as "the integration of the new scientific perspective on the natural world with traditional theological concepts, producing a new paradigm".²¹ Ecotheology, therefore, can be understood as a holistic approach to environmental issues, combining scientific secular modes of environmentalism with traditional and religious modes.

Theologian Celia Deane-Drummond, defines ecotheology as a reflection on different facets of theology that take their bearings from cultural concerns about

17 Ruether RR. 1992. *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco; Ruether RR, *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996; Habel N. 2004. *The Earth Bible Project*, Society for Biblical Literature Forum; Whitney E. 1993. "Lynn White, Ecotheology, and History", *Environmental Ethics* 15(2):151-169 [https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics199315229].

18 McLaughlin RP. 2012. "Thomas Aquinas's Eco-theological Ethics of Anthropocentric Conservation", *Horizons* 39(1):69-97 [https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900008549].

19 Troster L. 2013. "What Is Eco-Theology", *Cross Currents* 63(4):380-385 [https://doi.org/10.1111/cros.12043].

20 Troster, "What Is Eco-Theology", 382.

21 Troster, "What Is Eco-Theology", 382.

the environment and humanity's relationship with nature or the natural world.²² Moreover, ecotheology, "broadly speaking, is a particular expression of contextual theology that emerges in the particular contemporary context of environmental awareness that has characterised the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries".²³ What this means is that ecotheology is contextual in nature, in that it takes the context as foundational in the understanding of sacred or religious texts. Thus, from an ecotheological perspective, sacred texts are read to address the ecological concerns of the reader, making the endeavour a contextual one rooted in the real life and pertinent issues of the reader. Therefore, the theoretical framework affords readers and theologians the ability to apply ancient sacred texts to contemporary environmental concerns.

This is the point of departure for the present examination, which seeks to search the biblical text, especially the Bible for possible teachings on environmental care and conservation. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive list of scriptures on the subject, but to highlight certain aspects of environmentalism in our text(s). This is considered a worthwhile exercise given the magnitude of the impending environmental crisis, which may soon render the planet earth unlivable.

BIBLICAL STIPULATIONS ON ENVIRONMENTAL CARE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Again, it is important to note that the Bible is notorious for ambiguity, ambivalence and discrepancy in almost any subject. We also must appreciate that humanity being the only species endowed with the power of reason means that the Creator is not obliged to give us ready-made answers to all our problems. By creating humanity in the image and likeness of God, God the Creator must necessarily expect us to be reasonable and creative, much like God was in creating the universe in the Genesis story. If one follows the events of Creation, it suffices that there was creativity at work in the process. Thus, as creatures with similar if not the same qualities as the Creator and by virtue of being made in the image and likeness of the Creator (Genesis 1:27), human beings must be in a position to figure things out for ourselves. Thus, in reading and interpreting what we hold to be the word of God, as in facing most challenges, human beings must reason critically to find the best possible meaning and our way out. As proposed by Old Testament scholar Theodore Hiebert, scripture, which is at the foundation of our faith, takes this world seriously.²⁴ Such a stance requires us to discover that to be deeply religious in the biblical sense, we must see our material world as important to our faith as the world of spirit.²⁵

22 Deane-Drummond C. 2008. *Eco-Theology*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, x.

23 Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, x.

24 Hiebert T. 2011. "Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis", *Interpretation* 65(4):341-352 [https://doi.org/10.1177/002096431106500402].

25 Hiebert, "Reclaiming the World", 342.

On this point, it is noteworthy to say that the woman in Genesis 3 (the story of the Fall) demonstrated utter brilliance and proved to the Creator that humanity can figure it out for ourselves in tricky situations. By choosing to eat the fruit, Eve and her partner Adam broke out of infancy to a life of adulthood. Hence, we, their subsequent generations, have turned out the way we are: inquisitive, innovative and creative, like our Maker, whose creativity we see in the entire universe, according to the Creation narratives.

Eve was impressive here, and God must have been well pleased with her as the mother of human thought and reason in action and not dormancy and innocence. This is a point unapologetically expressed by Carolyn Custis James, an award-winning author and international speaker, when she asserts that Eve's forgotten legacy resides in the statements God made while he created her in his image and as Adam's strong helper.²⁶ She argues that God's command to be fruitful and multiply, to rule and subdue the earth not only meant the physical aspect but also the scientific, technological and artistic pursuits.²⁷ As such, God expected Eve to think, decide and act and she was not wrong to initiate.²⁸ No wonder, after eating the fruit, the couple's eyes were opened (Genesis 3:7) and immediately there was transition to maturity and adulthood and, hence, the realisation that they were in fact naked.

Nonetheless, Eve's legacy has been misunderstood throughout centuries, as many have been critical of her action and decision when approached by the serpent (Genesis 3). As noted by theologian Kristen Kvam and her colleagues, the biblical account of Creation in Genesis 1-3 has been pivotal in defining maleness and femaleness.²⁹ Worse still, it has been used to justify subordination of women to men and to support gender inequality to the detriment of women and girls.³⁰ Eve has been perceived negatively and marginally. The interpretations posit that because she was created after Adam, she was subordinate to him, and because she disobeyed God first, she became the instrument of the Fall, thus representing women's derivative status as weak and dangerous.³¹ Unfortunately, her story has defined a hierarchical relationship between the sexes to this day.³² My suggestion is that as we read the scriptures, we should figure out meanings that are affirming and positive, rather than disabling, oppressive and destructive. Thus, given the looming ecological crisis currently threatening us, we need to read the scriptures

26 James CC. 2005. *Lost Women of the Bible: The Women We Thought We Knew*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 3.

27 James, *Lost Women of the Bible*, 39.

28 James, *Lost Women of the Bible*, 39.

29 Kvam KE, Schearing LS and Ziegler VH (eds). 1999. *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim readings on Genesis and Gender*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2 [<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2050vqmq>].

30 Kvam et al., *Eve and Adam*, 4-5.

31 Kvam et al., *Eve and Adam*, 5.

32 Kvam et al., *Eve and Adam*, 5.

cautiously, seeking constructive meanings to help save our world, since we need it for our survival.

BIBLICAL TEXTS ON ENVIRONMENTAL CARE AND CONSERVATION

In what follows, I explore a random sample of biblical texts and verses with environmental messages. The exercise, however, is not intended to provide an exhaustive nor a chronological list of such for that will require a project on its own given the ecological richness of the Bible. That is, there is no planned order in the way texts have been selected, as the purpose is to give an overview that supports the idea that the Bible, can prove to be resourceful in efforts to address ecological issues currently facing the world. I begin with the ecological message of the first book of the Bible, namely, Genesis 1 which I believe sets the stage for biblical ecology. This is to show that the biblical text is richly crafted with ecological overtures that can be of great inspiration to us contemporary citizens of the earth as "we face a possible ecological end to the world as we know it".³³ All biblical quotations in this chapter are from the New International Version (NIV),³⁴ unless otherwise indicated.

Genesis 1:28

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

According to Genesis 1:2, humans are tasked with rulership and dominion to "rule" over and to "subdue" all of God's creation. It is worth noting that the mandate has been interpreted and re-interpreted differently by different readers and interpreters of the Bible. For some, it is one reason humankind has abused and mistreated the earth and its resources. For instance, it has been observed that some of the words in the above verse are problematic and have led to anthropocentrism or egocentrism.³⁵ Moreover, as noted by some scholars, Christians have a common belief that the material world, the one in which we live, is not our home, but a rather temporary stopover in our journey to a more permanent home, which is the spiritual world.³⁶ This is what ecotheologian and Bible scholar Norman Habel calls "heavenism" – the belief that ultimately we will settle permanently in heaven.³⁷ Ultimately, because

33 Rossing R. 1998. "River of Life in God's New Jerusalem: An Ecological Vision for Earth's Future", *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25:487-499.

34 Bible. New International Version (NIV) Grand Rapids: Zondervan (1978).

35 Kebaneilwe MD. 2015. "The Good Creation: an Eco-womanist Reading of Genesis 1-2", *Old Testament Essays (OTE)* 28(3):694-703 [https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2015/v28n3a8].

36 Hiebert, "Reclaiming the world", 344. See also Golo WK. 2012. "Redeemed from the Earth? Environmental Change and Salvation Theology in African Christianity: Christian faith and the Earth", *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 111(1):348-361 [https://doi.org/10.7833/111-1-17].

37 Habel N. 2010. "The Earth-Mission: The Third Mission of the Church", *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37(2):114-125.

of this dominant worldview, Christianity has focused more on the human person as the centre of God's Creation and on the otherworld of heaven, while neglecting the present world. This something of a predicament with global Christianity.³⁸ No wonder historian Lynn White concluded that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen".³⁹

The term "dominion" or *kabash* in Hebrew has negative connotations, such as "to violate", "to make subservient" and, worse still, "to rape".⁴⁰ Likewise, "to subdue" has similar nuances, implying a situation of power over powerlessness, or even worth over worthlessness so that humanity is, by implication, instructed by the Creator to subjugate the rest of God's creation. Such a stance, as suggested by ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, implies human transcendence over nature, which in turn has led to the inferiorisation of nature by mankind.⁴¹ Other studies have provided counter discourses on the same scripture. For instance, religion scholar Cambry Pardee insists, "Both parts of humanity's mandate toward the earth have the potential to connote harsh and exploitative rule; however, they must be redefined in the light of the paradigm of divine mastery and dominion."⁴² Pardee further suggests that there must be another way to contextualise dominion and subjection; for it is unfathomable that God will authorise humanity to invade, conquer and enslave his creation which he has pronounced as good.

It is worthwhile mentioning here that other biblical texts echo ecological messages similar to Genesis 1:28. For example, Psalm 8 contains the same themes as found in Genesis, namely, the royalty and pre-eminence of humanity over animals.⁴³ Such texts have often been interrogated for providing damaging anthropocentric perspectives with detrimental effects on nature and the natural world. To counteract such disabling interpretations, I have argued elsewhere that there is implied innate goodness and worth in all of creation, which could be the basis for the needed ecological sensitivity and environmental care and conservation.⁴⁴ Bible scholar Musa Dube concurs with the above perspective when she asserts that in Genesis 1, the human being is mandated to keep the earth community in the same good state as God created it.⁴⁵

38 Hiebert, "Reclaiming the world", 351.

39 White L (Jr). 1967. "The Historical Roots of the Ecologic Crisis", *Science* 155:1203-1207 [https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203].

40 Kebaneilwe, "The Good Creation", 698-699.

41 Ruether RR. 2012. "Ecofeminism-The Challenge to Theology", *DEP* 20:22-32 [https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735012436915].

42 Pardee C. 2013. "Making Earth Heaven: Ecological Implications of Genesis 1-3", *Leaven* 21(3):126-128.

43 Bergant D. 1998. *The Earth is the Lord's: The Bible, Ecology and Worship*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

44 Kebaneilwe, "The Good Creation", 701.

45 Dube MW. 2015. "And God saw that it was very good: An earth-friendly Theatrical reading of Genesis 1", *Black Theology* 13(3):230-246 [https://doi.org/10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000060].

2. "Do not pollute the land where you are"

Furthermore, as Pardee argues, the linguistic connection between humanity as represented in the Hebrew term *adam* (human/earthling) and *adamah* (earth) suggests intimacy between the two.⁴⁶ Humans were made out of the earth and hence are infinitely connected to and with it. Noteworthy too is that death completes the circle of intimacy in that one returns to the belly of the earth to be reconnected with and become one with it. It only makes sense that humanity must take care of, preserve and nurture the earth and all members of the earth community. Ultimately, all things ever created (animate and inanimate) are in a web of infinite connections. In reference to the Creation narratives of Genesis 1-3, Hiebert maintains that scripture highlights the importance of the natural world as our true home by starting the human story with Creation.⁴⁷ Such a starting point underscores the biblical idea that humans are first and foremost members of God's Creation which is the earth community.⁴⁸ For the same reason, Habel challenges the church to develop worship patterns that reflect on the status of the earth.⁴⁹ He argues that earth is a sacred site in which the Creator's presence is revealed through the Creation itself.⁵⁰

While a great deal has been said and can still be said about Genesis 1-3 regarding humanity's position and role in relation to the rest of it, there are numerous other texts that need to be redefined for our purposes. The Bible is packed with ecological teachings that we can tap into in order to address our present ecological predicament. We simply need to exercise reason, choice and free will in interpretation.

Numbers 35:33-34

Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell amongst the Israelites.

The above text is notable, as it forms part of the title of this chapter. It outrightly summons the reader to respect the earth and land. It also stipulates how that must be done, so that there is no denying the importance of its message. It can be said to underscore the preceding discussion of Genesis 1:28 by impressing upon the reader what, how and why the earth as the sustainer of all life must be well kept. It is an imperative from God the Creator that pollution of the land is prohibited. Further, bloodshed and murder are specified outright as acts of pollution of the land for which there is no pardon except murdering the murderer. While such a stipulation may not go down well with modern sensitivities and human rights stipulations, we can still unpack it for insight into the issue at hand – the current environmental crisis.

46 Pardee, "Making Earth Heaven", 126.

47 Hiebert, "Reclaiming the world", 344.

48 Hiebert, "Reclaiming the world", 345.

49 Habel, "The Earth-Mission", 117.

50 Habel, "The Earth-Mission", 115.

It goes without saying that Numbers 35:33-34 advocates for a number of important things. First, it suggests an ethic of environmental conservation that requires inhabitants of the land to treat it with respect by not polluting. Second, it underscores the sanctity of human life and advocates for respect of such by prohibiting bloodshed and insisting that it constitutes pollution. Further, the Creator explains that cleanliness and, hence, care and nurturing of the land where one lives is a matter of urgency. This is not only for the benefit of the individual, but more so the entire community, since the Creator God also dwells in the land. From this text, we may conclude that in ancient Israelite thinking the land did not belong just to the people, but to their God, as well. Hence, as a sign of reverence to God, care and conservation were matters of obligation. Norman Habel expresses similar sentiments when he posits that, according to Isaiah 6:3, Earth is a sanctuary filled with God's presence, which compels all of humanity to develop strategies for protecting this sanctuary.⁵¹ What does this mean to us today?

In Botswana, which is the present researcher's immediate context, shedding of human blood in the name of "passion killings" has become common place.⁵² Research shows that the so-called "passion killings", the phrase which is used to refer to the murder of a person by their intimate partner, is prevalent in Botswana, so much so that it is an epidemic.⁵³ Statistics further indicate that bloodshed through such homicides is undeniably a gendered epidemic, which affects the female folk more than their male counterparts. For instance, according to the report of a study titled *The Gender Based Violence (GBV) Indicator Study: Botswana*, almost 70% of women in the country experience violence in their lifetime.⁵⁴ The situation has prompted the United Nations, in solidarity with the Botswana government, to join key stakeholders and society at large to condemn GBV.⁵⁵ Thus, the UN strongly condemned the recent event in which a young Motswana⁵⁶ woman who was murdered and beheaded by her boyfriend, amongst other brutal murders of women and girls which have been taking place across the country lately.⁵⁷ My argument here is that shedding of blood is clearly an environmental pollutant that must be avoided. The biblical text advocates for respect of life and underscores the sanctity thereof.

51 Habel, "The Earth-Mission", 115-117.

52 Exner D and Thurston WE. 2009. "Understanding 'Passion Killings' in Botswana: An Investigation of Media Framing", *Journal of International Women's Studies* 10(4):1-16. See also, Ellece SE and Rapoo C. 2013. "Who Should Teach our Boys How to Respect Life? Theorising Volatile Gender Identities in Botswana", *Marang: Journal of Language and Literature* 23(1):59-73.

53 Exner and Thurston, "Understanding 'Passion Killings' in Botswana", 1.

54 Machisa M and van Dorp R. 2012. *The Gender Based Violence Indicators Study: Botswana*. Oxford: African Books Collective.

55 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Botswana. 2018. "Statement by United Nations in Botswana to Condemn Gender Based Violence, Especially Violence Against Women and Children", 27 August.

56 "Motswana" refers to a citizen of Botswana and is the singular form of "Batswana".

57 Kgamanyane N. 2018. "Woman Found Beheaded in Tlokwyeng", *MmgeiOnline*, 30 July.

Ultimately, Numbers 35:33-35 emphasises that respect for human life means respect for the environment and, indeed, respect and honour for God. Ultimately, all of reality is connected and interconnected: land, with all its creatures (animate and inanimate), humanity and God. Environmental care and conservation, therefore, mean that all interested parties and stakeholders will benefit.

Deuteronomy 20:19

When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them?

The above text puts emphasis on the respect for non-human creation, such as trees in this case. Even during warfare, people are reminded to show respect for the environment for after all plants are a source of food for humankind. Further, there is a call for humanity to be mindful of the interconnectivity of humans and non-human creation. Environmental preservation and care will lead the environment, fauna and flora to be able to sustain human life, but it begins with humans being able to nurture, respect and care for them, in return. Biblical archaeologist Aren Maeir and his colleagues assert that the text relates to the "rules of engagement" for the Israelite army while besieging a city.⁵⁸ It stipulates what is and what is not to be done to the vegetation in the vicinity, in the event of war.⁵⁹ The text seems to prescribe an element of ecological conservation and restraint.⁶⁰ It goes without saying that the ancient people whose history we read in the Bible, particularly the Israelites, were aware of the magnitude of the destruction that could result from siege warfare. The text here being examined is one example of the many found throughout the Bible that acted as policies and teachings on ecological preservation. Deuteronomy 20 specifically provides some rules regarding how to lessen the impact of war on vegetation in the war zone. If ancient peoples were already taking precautions to look after the natural world, what more do we need to do centuries later? This shows the urgency with which we need to tackle ecological issues as the twenty first century citizens of Earth.

It is notable that warfare is one of the devastating human activities with regards to the environment. Gary Machlis, a professor of conservation, and his colleagues argue that war is both intensive and has far reaching effects on the environment; hence, it is one of the human activities that contribute to ecological change.⁶¹

58 Maeir AM, Ackermann O and Bruins HJ. 2006. "The Ecological Consequences of a Siege: A Marginal Note on Deuteronomy 20:19-20", in Gitlin S, Wright JE and Dessel JP (eds). *Confronting the Past: Archaeological and Historical Essays on Ancient Israel in Honor of William G. Dever*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 239-243.

59 Maeir et.al., "The Ecological Consequences of a Siege", 242.

60 Maeir et al., "The Ecological Consequences of a Siege", 242.

61 Machlis GE and Hanson T. 2011. "Warfare Ecology", in Machlis, Hanson, Špirić Z and McKendry JE (eds). *Warfare Ecology: A New Synthesis for Peace and Security*. Dordrecht: Springer, 33-40 [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1214-0_5].

In another study, it has been discovered that during warfare, the land and all its inhabitants suffer from a number of things. That is, grassland, soil and vegetation can be destroyed by heavy machinery, such as tanks and armoured cars.⁶² The same study asserts that bombings and the use of chemicals and poisonous materials during war can lead to immense damage and in some cases permanent destruction to the affected place.⁶³ During and after bombings, for instance, certain gases are emitted, such as carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, nitrous oxide and litharge with some metal atomy and these have long reaching and adverse effects on the general ecological sphere.⁶⁴ Deuteronomy 20:19 insist that even in the time of war, the environment is to be respected, not just for the benefit it brings to people, but more so that nature can survive. The question that Deuteronomy 20:19 ends with, “Are trees people that you should besiege them?” underscores human activities as responsible for much of the destruction nature has suffered to this day. Warfare is here marked as one of the most devastating human activities to the natural world.

It is noteworthy that the book of Deuteronomy is well known for its legal codes; hence stipulations on ecological preservation are abundant in it. Further examples include the book’s prohibition on taking both a mother bird and her eggs for food (Deuteronomy 22:6). That the eggs but not the mother may be taken is meant to ensure that the mother is spared for further reproduction and continuity. There is also the instructive note against animal cruelty which prohibits brutal treatment, such as muzzling an ox while using it to thresh grain (Deuteronomy 25:4). Similar regulations governing the safety of and welfare of animals include Proverbs 12:10, which insists that a righteous person has regard for the life of their animal. At the end of the day, the earth and everything in it, including human beings, is the Lord’s (Psalm 24:1-2).

CONCLUSION

The main argument in this chapter is that the biblical text, as exemplified in the texts or scriptures discussed, is loaded with ecological lessons. Thus, if tapped, the Bible might prove valuable to us today as we seek to address the looming ecological collapse. The discussion of this chapter has indicated that there is panic arising from the tangible effects of global warming, which include extremes in weather conditions, changes in seasons and seasonal phenomena such as rain and snow.

Importantly it is observed that many of the ecological changes are a result of human activities. Amongst such are greenhouse emissions which immensely impact nature in adverse ways. The pollutants that are produced from the burning of fuels, industrialisation and technological developments, population increase throughout

62 Li H and Wang L. 2008. *The Effect of War on the Environment*, Student thesis, Roskilde University, 13 June. Online at: <https://forskning.ruc.dk/en/studentProjects/the-effect-of-war-on-the-environment>

63 Li and Wang, *The Effect of War on the Environment*, 13-15.

64 Li and Wang, *The Effect of War on the Environment*, 15.

2. "Do not pollute the land where you are"

the world and deforestation are mentioned amongst leading human associated impacts with a magnitude potential to lead our world to collapse on us. The Bible makes direct stipulations concerning ways in which humanity may be able to establish a harmonious relationship with the rest of Creation. Regulations are found throughout the biblical text, beyond those presented here, that are meant to guide human beings as we navigate our ways through the vast cosmos which is portrayed as one with us and with the Creator.

It has also been noted in the discussions that the tendency for humans to view themselves as superior over all other Creation has been a source of abuse, misuse and ultimately destruction of non-human Creation. Such egocentric and anthropocentric worldviews can no longer hold in a world threatened with collapse. It is proposed that efforts must be made by everyone alive today to appreciate the web of connections and interconnections amongst all of the Earth community. Such a holistic realisation will redefine our dealings; first, with each other as humans, and particularly beyond the gender divide which has often disadvantaged women; secondly, with flora and fauna: and, ultimately, with the Creator who sits at the heart of Creation. All it takes is a fresh look at the Bible and critical search through its pages for affirmative readings that are less damaging to the desired relationship amongst all the inhabitants of the Earth.