
NEW TESTAMENT ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE NIGER DELTA

Isiorhovoja, U. Osbert and Banwune Ejime .D
Department of Religious Studies, Delta State University, Abraka
Department of Religious and Moral Education College of Education, Agbor
E-mail:evanosbert@yahoo.com; ejimebanwune@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the biblical background of creation that is traceable to God as the creator. The Genesis account established the primary assignment of man as given by God; that of tending the garden (environment) under His instruction as steward. Also, the New Testament background is likewise examined, considering the fall and the anticipated literature closely likened to the manifestation of the sons of men. The present wanton exploration of the environment without adequate care negates the order given by God. Thus, sustainability of the environment becomes the sure way out to bringing redemption to the environment at the manifestation of the sons of men as stewards of God, rested with such responsibility. The paper strongly recommend the biblical paradigm of nature, care and perseverance (sustainability) and the Traditional perspective (Operation Noah) to rescue certain species of creatures from extinction.

INTRODUCTION

The study raised important questions on the activities of man which are at variance with the biblical discourse in the first chapter of the book of Genesis that gives a vivid account of creation by God; everything in the universe had its own day wherein he created it with man as the crown of his creation "then God said let us make man in our own image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" [Gen 1: 26]. He was vested with dominion to rule as well as to care fore the creation. Thus, man is charged to govern the earth responsibly under God's sovereignty [Gen.1:26]. This responsibility of caring for the creation as given by God became the basis of acknowledging his divine purpose for establishing friendly environment for our sustenance and the glorification of his purpose but man has coveteously destroyed the environment which is the groaning of the creation in Gaebelein [1978] argument as presented by Paul in Romans 8:18-25:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption

of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Keywords: *New Testament, Environmental Ethic, Sustainable Environment, Ethical Teaching, Sustainability, Niger Delta*

The Old Testament Background

There is much to learn from the teachings of the Old Testament [OT] that will serve as basis for the New Testament environmental ethic, Meyer [1991] notes that the [OT] teaching on care for the created world is abundantly clear; Gods people are to respect and care for it. Decanio [2003] in his introduction to the book of Genesis affirms the existence of God .He notes that God is external and transcends his creation; that everything exists because He created it by the power and authority of his word. "And God said, let there be ..." [Gen1;3][Cf. 1: 6, 9, 14, 20, 24]. Thus, Genesis reveals God as self –existing, external being who acts on the basis of his own sovereignty, authority, power, knowledge, understanding etc, to create the world, giving it, its form and function. It is the basis of all revelation underlying the creational account in the biblical literature from the Old Testament. Willmington [1995] identifies the threefold division of the commandment; the moral code, commonly referred to as the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. The Spiritual Code deals with those special ordnances which foreshadowed Christ and his full redemption; The Social Code spans rules governing Israel's diet, sanitation, quarantine, soil conservation, taxation, military service, marriage, childbirth, divorce among others, are succinctly discussed. The nation of Israel is to keep these laws not only as a sign of reverence to God but also, as a mark of acknowledgement of his Lordship over his people. In Deuteronomy 22, there was a re-enactment of the covenant stipulations and the repetition of the laws. God set man in a natural environment with the sole responsibility of caring for the creation. Hence, strict adherence and observance of the law will enable man live in appreciation to God and to live with one another in love and care, void of the present wanton destruction of lives, properties as well as the natural environment through diverse form of explorations for personal gains without sustainability [Isiorhovoja 2002].

The Psalmist declares, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and all those who dwell therein" [Psalm 24:1] In his comment, Barker [1985], states that it proclaims the Lord as the creator, sustainer and possessor of the whole world, and therefore worthy of worship and reverent loyalty as the king of glory. In like vein, Adam [2000], adds that God is the creator and governor of the earth, affirming his ownership; though men may claim districts and kingdom of it as their own, but he is the owner [creator] "the fullness therefore". All its creatures including plant, the silver and the gold, the cattle on a thousand hills as well as they that dwell therein [Psalm 50:10]. Hence the prophets continuous warning, because man cannot selfishly achieve physical affluence without exploring the created world or oppressing the poor. "Seek good and not evil ... But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream" [Amos 5:14 Cf. Jer.22:3; Isaiah 45:8

and Micah 6:8]. The reoccurrence of similar themes in the prophets establish the ethical background of the Old Testament, revealing God's true intention of conservation and sustainability to his own glory.

Background of the Ethical Teaching

It is important to have a thorough view of the New Testament [NT] on environmental ethic in order to ascertain the perspective in which the earth is perceived and the duty of man to his immediate environment and his sustainability. The impact of soil erosion, water and air pollution, deforestation, desertification, oil spillage and its attendant problems are here with us and prevalent daily. Thus, Meyer [1991] argues strongly, asking if the NT Christianity lacks an environmental ethic hence, it is important to understand the rediscovering of the theology of creation by God and the recent understanding of man vis-à-vis wanton exploration void of sustainability. Paulos Mar Gregorious from the Indian orthodox tradition describes this theology in a recent book *Tending the Garden* edited by Wesley [1991], describes and identified three basic ecological principles in the NT passages: [Rom.8:18-25, Col.1:15-25 and John 1:1-5]. In Romans 8:18-25 Paul posits that human redemption can be understood only as an integral part of the redemption of the whole creation. However, since all creation looks forward to salvation, it is implied that not only man look forward to salvation; rather, the whole creation, cosmic redemption or the participation of all creation in the liberation of humanity from its current bondage. To develop a genuine environmental ethic, a new understanding of the redemption in Christ Jesus will have to take into account both personal and corporate salvation, spiritual and mental reality in the creation and incarnation; the created order as the object and field of the redeeming order with humanity, as integrally related to the whole cosmos as in Colossians 1:15-23. "Who is the image of the invisible God", the object here, as it is in the parallel is to give a just view of the exaltation of the Redeemer.

...which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." [Ephesians 1:20-23]

He represents to mankind the perfections of God, as an image or figure. It properly denotes that, which is a copy or delineation of a thing which accurately and fully represents it, in contradistinction from a rough sketch or outline. "...predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" [Rom.8: 29 Cf. 1Cor 11:7; 15: 49], the being and perfections of God are accurately and fully represented by Christ. In what respects particularly he was thus a representative of God? The apostle proceeds to state in the above verses, to wit, in his creative power, in his eternal existence, in his heirship over the universe, in the fullness that dwells in him. This cannot refer to him merely as incarnate, for some of the things affirmed of him pertained to him before his incarnation, and the idea is, that in all things Christ fairly

represents to us the divine nature and perfections through which God is made manifest to us according to Paul:

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory" [1Tim.3:16].

We see God in Christ as we see an object in that which is in all respects an exact copy of it. God is invisible; no eye has seen him, or can see him, but in what Christ is, and has done in the works of creation and redemption, we have a fair and full representation of what God is. Wiersbe [1981] further corroborates the ideals of Christ being the primary source of creation adding that everything exists in him, for him and through him. Jesus Christ is the sphere in which they exist, the agent through which they came into being, and the one for whom they were made. Paul's use of the different preposition is one way of refuting the philosophy of the false teachers, who for centuries had taught that everything needed a primary cause, an instrumental cause for he produced it and the final cause for his own pleasure. The present environmental situation in the Niger Delta generally characterized with incessant oil spillage due to oil exploration without adequate compensation and plan for environmental sustainability, bush burning destroying vast hectares of land and natural vegetation, water pollution which has reduced or totally destroyed aquatic life and the ecosystem in the region, deforestation and erosion problems. Sustainable human and environmental development became paramount as certain governments' policies and programs have become mirage, dirge and utopia. Mosher [1996] attests to the wanton destruction of the environment by condemning the present exploration of the natural environment. His argument shows a natural understanding of nature as being loaned to man; therefore, they were in solidarity with all creation and could even as for forgiveness when they kill an animal for food. Similarly, he points at the effects of certain agricultural practices that have contributed to poisoning the earth by using toxic pesticides capable of killing animals, fish, snails, and man through the process of indirect contact through streams where people drink, bath and wash clothes.

Wiersbe [1981] also affirms the destruction, stating that when God finished his creation, it was good "*And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.*" [Gen1:31], but today, it is a groaning creation, there is suffering and death, there is pain. Thus Paulos Mar Gregoris contends that:

Christ himself should be seen in his three principle relationship: a) To members incorporated into his body, b) To the human race; and c) To other than human orders of created existence in a many planned universe. Each of these relate to other. (Meyer 1991).

In the incarnation of Christ, He took the earthly body and became a part of the creation, thus reconciling all parts of the creation to him. Through this process, the created order is to be set free and to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. This basic idea is in

consonance with the Hebrew concept of salvation which is holistic. Consequently, we must move beyond personal salvation to declare and to teach an inclusive dimension that embrace mankind, animals and the environment. Only in this process that the created order will find fulfilment through Christ. The apostle, filled with the thought of the future glory of creation, pours forth this splendid passage, in which he represents the whole creation groaning under its present deplorable degradation; looking and longing for the revelation of this glory as the end and consummation of its existence [Berkhof 1977]. In like vein, Nicoll et al [1953]: buttressed this opinion adding that this mystical sympathy of physical nature with the work of grace is beyond the comprehension of most of us. However, who can disprove it? But others by the creature, the whole creation understand this miserable world, sensitive and rational, animate and inanimate; and the sense is, that:

The whole frame and course of creation is so ordered and disposed off by God, and that it carries in it vehement desire and earnest longing for the full manifestation of God's glory in and towards his children (Nicoll 1953).

There is restlessness and uneasiness of the creature under this vanity and servility: it groans like a man under a burden, or like a travailing woman in labour. So the environment is in continual labour to serve man's necessity and it is often times punished together with man for the sin's humanity has committed; witnessed in the old world and Sodom; and as they are oft times constrained and compelled by men to serve the lust of man. Thus, the whole creation groans under the burden of man's selfish desires while man lavishes the wealth of the creation on himself. Burkitt (2000) opined that,

the groan of the creature are upbraiding groans, they upbraid our stupidity and unthankfulness; they are accusing groans as they will witness against us at the bar of God; they are awakening groans to excite and stir us up to sigh and long for a better state; and they are instinctive groans, to teach us our sins and their vanity.

This statement is a candid reminder as well as a pointer to the need for sustainability of the environment; that which God has placed under man's care as steward, accountable to him; an avenue of praise and manifestation of his glory.

The Need for Sustainable Environmental Development

The need for environmental sustainability from the biblical perspective calls for concerted effort to achieve a conducive environment. Sa'id (2001) states that in Nigeria as in many other developing countries, environmental problems are imposing a wide range of social and economic costs, thus, threatening the livelihood of majority of the people. He further argues, quoting the World Bank study:

The long term losses to the country of not acting on the growing environmental threats of soil degradation, water contamination, deforestation, coastal erosion and others are estimated at over \$5 million annually.

The level of water contamination due to environmental pollution has resulted in the poor drinking, habits of most people. In the Niger Delta region ordinarily, the terrain provides water but due to pollution,, a survey conducted reveal that satchet water of 50cl now sell for as much as #20.00 in most part of the region which, formerly sold for #5.00. The quest for infrastructural development has not left the natural rainforest to persist. Deforestation is still on the increase because most people depend on the natural resources which in clued the natural forest with a myriad of lumbering activities. Sa'id attests to the annual deforestation of the country at 35%. Mba and Mba (2003) thus state that the currency of the two closely related concepts of sustainable development and environment underscores the new global concern for the quality of man's habitat vis-à-vis his advancement through time. This point thus liven the biblical injunction given by the Creator in Genesis "*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it*" (Gen. 2:15). This text affirms man's duty as steward. Anih (2003) identified and opines that the true sign of stewardship will greatly result in the following:

- a) the care for the natural resource base will inversely provide the essential raw materials and ingredients that man needs for his daily support and providence
- b) the environment will naturally be recycle without man struggling to manage it.
- c) The environment will purify and protect man; giving him some simple amenities and opportunities for recreation and atmospheric protection e.g. the ultra-violet rays due to the depleting ozone layer.

The attainment of sustainability is conceivable on the basis that man gives a prior through to the defilement of the environment: knowing fully that it is man's concern as stewards before God to threat the earth according to his will and not to destroy it to satisfy our whims, greed and selfishness [Seaton 1992]. Similarity, Gunton [1992] in Pursuit of sustainability, avows that, it is the responsibility of every man and woman to be harbinger of this urgent mission. Hence Sa'id's argument as environmental challenges of development was corroborated by Gunton and Seaton. They are also in line with the National Agenda 21 aimed at ensuring that every Nigerian achieve sustainable livelihoods through the pursuit of strategies that simultaneously address issues of development, sustainable resource management and environmental protection (Sa'id 2001). The fragile Niger Delta ecosystem according to Ukpong and Akpabio (2003) began to deteriorate with the discovery and exploration of crude oil in the late 1950's, thus for over fifty years, environmental deterioration and its attendant problem of poverty have persisted in the sub region. On the part to sustainability of the region, they argue in support of integrated environmental management approach that incorporates both science and technology to broker the situation. Kinoti (2006) from biblical and traditional perspectives argues in favour of Operation Noah as a means of rescuing all creatures in danger of extinction; while totemism should be encouraged to preserve certain species as evidenced in certain communities.

CONCLUSION

The responsibility or caring for the environment is the primary responsibility of man; nature in return rewards man by providing for his needs. The impact of environmental loss due to

man's negligence and over utilisation of the environment to gratify personal desires aimed at self gratification are at variance with the biblical ethic for the environment. True biblical environmental ethic looks forward to redemption of the son of men; the environment which is also under going the present deplorable state anticipates the hope as the full knowledge of God is made manifest in man, so the environment also will be liberated from its present sufferings.

RECOMMENDATION

To ensure a sustainable environmental ethic that will be most rewarding in view of the above discussions,

1. The intention of the Creator for man to be his steward should be re-echoed through moral and environmental studies to create greater awareness in the mind of the public
2. Companies involved in oil exploration activities should be made to sign Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) that will closely monitored for any form of violation
3. Government should know that the peoples interest and welfare supercede personal welfare and therefore should not compromise this standard for immediate gains
4. Non-governmental agencies as well as the host communities should be on the watch for any form of environmental laws violation, and
5. The traditional values of keeping certain species of animal as well as land sacred should not be undervalued as such place provide for ecological balances

REFERENCES

- Adam, C.,(2000) *Bible Commentary* in Power Bible CD Program, Phil Lindner Online Publishing Inc,p. 3-4.
- Barker, K. (ed),(1985) *The NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, p. 808
- Berkhof, H.,(1977) *Christ and Powers*, Scottdale: Herald Press,(452).
- Burkitt, W.(2000) *Notes on New Testament* in Power Bible CD Program, Phil Lindner Online Publishing Inc, p.354.
- DeCanio, T. F.(2003) *Analysis and Synthesis of the Book s of the Bible*, Ilorin: Great Ajibaiye Industries, p.59.
- Gaebelein, F.E.(1978) *The Expository Bible Commentary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, p.93.
- Gunton, C.E.(1992) *Christ and Creation*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, p.152.

- Isiorhovoja, U. O.(2002) "Ethical and Moral Relevance of the Law to Modern Society" A Seminar Paper RCT 357, Presented at the Baptist Theological Seminary, Eku, p.7.
- Kinoti, G.(2006) "Christians and the Environment" *African Bible Commentary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Word Alive Publishers, p.616.
- Mba, C.C and Mba, L. C.(2003) "The Impact of Environmental Degradation on Sustainable Development in Nigeria", ed. et al.Onopkala, P.C. *Environment and Poverty in Nigeria*, Enugu: Jamoe Enterprises, p.114.
- Meyer, A. and Meyer, J.(1991) *Earth Keepers: Environmental Perspectives on Hunger, Poverty and Injustice*, Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Books, pp. 27,28, 29-30.
- Mosher, S.(1996) *God's Power, Jesus' Faith and World Mission: A Study in Romans*, Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, pp.165-166.
- Nicoll, R., Stoddart, T. J.and Moffatt, J.((1953) *The Expositor's Dictionary of Texts*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 356.
- Sa'id, K. M.(2001) "Keynote Address at the National Workshop on Environment and Poverty Alleviation in the New Millennium, University of Nigeria, Nsuka, 7th - 9th August, p.xxiii.
- Seaton, C. (1992) *Whose Earth?* Great Britain: Crossway Books, p.115.
- Ukpong, I and Akpabio, E.(2003) "Petroleum Pollution in a part of Niger Delta: Implications on Sustainable Agriculture, Fishing and Health" in ed. Onokala, P.C. et al. *Environment and Poverty in Nigeria*, Enugu: Jamoe Enterprises, pp. 57,70.
- Wesley, G.(1991) "New Testament foundations for Understanding the Creation" in Meyer, A. and Meyer, J. *Earth Keepers: Environmental Perspectives on Hunger, Poverty and Injustice*, Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Books, pp.83-92.
- Wiersbe, W. W.(1981) *Be Complete*, Wheaton. Illinois: Victor Books, pp.48-49.
- Wiersbe, W. W.(1981) *Be Right*, Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, p.192.
- Willmington, H. L.(1995) *Willmington's Guide to the Bible*, Sri Lanka: Christian Literature Crusade, p.71.