Redeeming the Priestly Role of Theology for the Land of Africa

LUBUNGA W'EHUSHA (UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU–NATAL)

ABSTRACT

The article is an attempt to rise to the challenge raised by Peet van Dyk in his contribution to Old Testament Essays 22/1, where he calls upon South African OT scholars to develop a relevant ecotheology that can address current ecological issues. This challenge becomes more urgent as the environmental crisis gets increasingly serious, and as problems related to land distribution continue to affect social, political and economic life in many African countries. However, there are pertinent issues to be dealt with if theologians want to contribute toward solving current ecological problems. On the one hand, Christianity is accused of having inspired the industrialised, capitalistic society of the Western world to dominate and to abuse nature. On the other hand, several theological critics consider the biblical message as so overwhelmingly anthropocentric that it virtually cancels the possibility of an adequate articulation of environmental concerns. Notwithstanding criticisms regarding the contribution of Christianity and of the Bible in contributing to the environmental crisis, this article advocates redeeming the priestly role of theology in order to address the effects of the global ecological crisis on the African continent. In this article the author suggests that, if theology has been used to encourage humankind to dominate and abuse nature, it can be redeemed by playing a significant priestly role instructing people how to care for and restore nature.

A INTRODUCTION

There is a growing awareness of the danger looming for the future of the earth as news in the media and scientific data show that environmental degradation is worsening year after year.[1] Many environmental reports show that, unless the current trend is curbed, the earth will cease to be a safe habitat for all – humankind, fauna and flora. In response to the alarm raised by ecologists, scientists, politicians, and theologians are attempting to find solutions to the crisis. However, since human greed and exploitation of nature are by and large responsible

[1] Worldwatch Institute provides facts and predictions about ecological problems worldwide from year to year since 1974. Valuable resources relating to this matter are available online at www.worldwatch.org.

for most of the damage caused to our ecosystem,[2] success or failure of their endeavour depends on human willingness to change. Zimmermann underscores the responsibility of human activities for the current crisis as he attests: "Modern technology, industry, government, and political ideologies conspire to promote projects that are beneficial for some people, but that harm many other people, as well as organisms, landscapes, and ecosystems."[3]

It is admitted that the cause of ecological problems goes deep to the heart of human beings who have chosen to be exploiters rather than keepers of the creation. Lynn White puts his finger on the culprit as he argues that the solution to the present ecological crisis is to "find a new religion or to rethink our old one."[4] Therefore, the issue of environmental problems lies not in science and technology but in human belief. One's belief determines one's relationship with the creation, guiding how one treats nature, God and other humans. Case–Winters is even more outspoken on the fact that human beings should revisit their attitude toward nature. She states that, "Changes in behaviour must grow out of changes at a deeper level. A reorientation akin to conversion is needed."[5]

With the above statements, White and Case–Winters bring the problem into the realm of theologians and theological expertise—conversion and change of worldview are called for. Even secular environmentalists are aware that technological solutions to the environmental crisis are inadequate without spiritual commitments.[6] The question that many theologians have raised is how to redeem nature when our instrument of redemption—the Bible—is itself at fault or lacking in conviction when dealing with nature. In this article I will look at a number of criticisms raised against biblical theology/Christianity and examine

---

[2] The major causes of ecological problems such as emission of greenhouse gases, nuclear waste, pollution of water and air, deforestation, population explosion and the destruction of wild species are mostly human–induced problems.

[3] Michael E. Zimmerman, "General Introduction to the Fourth Edition," in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology* (ed. Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Calliot, Karen J. Warren, Irene J. Klaver and John Clark; Upper Dandle River, N.J.: Pearson–Prentice Hall, 2005), 3.

[4] Lynn White, "Appendix 1: The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (ed. Francis A. Shaeffer; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970): 83.

[5] Anna Case–Winters, *Reconstructing a Christian Theology of Nature: Down to Earth* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 18.

[6] The acknowledgment of religious communities as stakeholders in addressing the ecological crisis has been underscored by the Moscow Conference 1990. See David Suzuki and Faisal Moola, "Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival in Moscow, Moscow Conference 1990," n.p. [cited 16 May 2013]. Online: http://www.davidsuzuki.org/blogs/science–matters/2010/07/protecting–the–planet–is–a–sacred–and–scientific–duty/.

how theologians react to these criticisms by adopting redeeming approaches. The major focus of the article is on the question why theology should play a priestly role in this context.

B HAS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY CONTRIBUTED TO THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS?

The polemic about the Bible/theology being at fault where ecological problems are concerned has generated a swell of discussions and writings among theologians and among non–theologians as well. The limited scope of this article does not allow for covering the debate in its entirety. But I would like in this section to highlight in particular the concerns of Lynn White, and of feminist theology and the Earth Bible project as representative of the wider controversy on this matter.

1 Christian Roots of Ecological Crisis

Many scholars agree that Lynn White's article, "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," has set in motion a stream of accusations that continue to affect theological reflections on ecology to date.[7] White puts the blame on the Judeo–Christian theology of creation as having engendered or legitimised a culture of exploitation and destruction of nature. He mentions the teaching of Gen 1:26–28, that humans are created in God's image and have to exert dominion over nature. This text has been used to elevate humankind over and above the rest of creation. He argues, "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."[8] The superiority of human beings over non–human life has led to a culture of consumerism and abuse for the sake of personal interest. White is adamant that,

> Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.[9]

This mandate to rule over nature, according to White, has influenced European society and its industrialisation which considers non–human ele-

---

[7] Lynn White's article (White, "Appendix 1,") was first published as Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *SM* 155 (1967): 1203–1207. This article is the most quoted in numerous writings about ecology and theology/church. See Case–Winters, *Reconstructing*, 19–23; Gunther Wittenberg, "In Search of the Right Metaphor: A Response to Peet van Dyk's 'Challenges in the Search for an Ecotheology': Part One: Metaphor and Dominion," *OTE* 23/2 (2010): 429. Peet J. van Dyk, "Eco–Theology and Losing the Sacred," *OTE* 23/3 (2010): 822, and Peet J. van Dyk, "Challenges in the Search for an Ecotheology," *OTE* 22/1 (2009): 189.

[8] White, "Appendix 1," 79.

[9] White, "Appendix 1," 79.

ments of creation as raw material to be used for human betterment. Despite the rise of secularism, Western culture remains grounded in its heritage of Christian traditions that consider human beings as rulers of the creation. In support of White's argument many writers have expanded and elaborated on various elements of Christian theology/tradition which may have contributed to the exploitation of nature. Case–Winters has examined a number of biblical teachings in this regard. These concern a lack of thematic attention to nature, overvaluation of history in contrast to nature, a creation story that places humankind at its centre, an invitation to subdue the earth and have dominion over its creatures, and desacralising of nature.[10] Van Dyk has added a number of other negative observations that resulted from discussions among theologians to the list of reasons for blaming the Bible, such as: patriarchal monotheism, negative concept of wilderness, the promise of land, apparent indifference of the Bible towards the environment.[11] He mentions various additional philosophical, social, and theological constraints on ecological concerns.[12]

The fact that White's view, ascribing the responsibility for the crisis to Christianity, has continued to be echoed by subsequent scholars to date, demonstrates the pertinence of these charges. In spite of the growing number of theological discussions which attribute White's viewpoint to a misinterpretation of the biblical texts, one cannot dismiss the impression that many Christians believe that the earth with everything it contains has been given to humankind for its enjoyment. As the margin between enjoying creation and abusing it is but small, few people are able to strike a balance in the relationship between humans and nature. In addition to White, feminist theology has also raised concerns about the interpretation of the Bible in such a way as to legitimise all kinds of abuse. This feminist viewpoint will be discussed in the following section.

2 Feminist Theology

Feminist theology also challenges Western theological tradition on its responsibility for the current ecological crisis. Rosemary Radford Ruether is thought to be one of the first women to have drawn parallels between the exploitation of the earth and the oppression of women based on the interpretation of the Bible. She argues, "We cannot criticize the hierarchy of male over female without ultimately criticizing and overcoming the hierarchy of humans over nature."[13] The concept of dominion, much debated as the source of human exploitation, is clearly underscored by Ruether and other eco–feminist theologians. Reuther attributes the culture of dominion which characterises Christianity today as a combination of apocalyptic Judaism and neo–Platonism. As a

10 Case–Winters, *Reconstructing*, 21– 23.
11 Van Dyk, "Challenges," 192–196.
12 Van Dyk, "Challenges," 196–200.
13 Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God–Talk* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 73.

result Christianity has adopted the dualisms of mind/body, intellect/emotion, spirit/matter, culture/nature, and male/female.[14] This dualistic worldview has served to establish a logic of dominion whereby one element of each dualistic pair is considered superior to and consequently dominant over the other. Following this logic, the ruling paradigm becomes mind over body, spirit over matter, culture over nature and male over female. Karen Warren, in her eco–feminist philosophical arguments, is more explicit on how this dualism can be used to justify oppressive behaviours in "top–down" relationships. She notes:

> A logic of dominion provides the alleged moral stamp of approval for unjustified subordination, since, if accepted, it provides a justification for keeping Downs down. The logic of dominion provides the moral premise that justifies the subordination of Downs by Ups in Up–Down relationship of dominion and subordination.[15]

Warren joins other eco–feminists in deploring the fact that the Bible has been used in Western theology to provide a moral stamp of approval for the dominion and exploitation of women and nature.

Like Warren many eco–feminist theologians acknowledge that Western theology, in its hierarchical system, validates top–down interrelationships that have been used to sanction abuse; accordingly it should be rethought or reconceptualised. To reinforce the argument Mary Grey, in her approach to eco–feminism based on her experience of working with the marginalised women in India who are struggling for human dignity, reiterates the appeal to revisit the dominion aspect of the theology of creation. She suggests "a radical rethinking of our cosmic, cultural and vital reference points."[16]

This "radical rethinking" is needed because Western culture has failed to consider humankind as part of the web of life, as depending on, and living in communion with, non–human creatures. Anne Primavesi has made a substantial contribution to eco–feminist theological thoughts by using the imagery of Gaia as an alternative way of identifying human beings with the earth, emphasising connectedness. She attributes the violence against the earth to the image of God as mediated by Western theology which presents God as exerting his

---

[14] Steven Bouma–Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jurgen Moltmann* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 28.

[15] Karen Warren, "The Power and the Promise of Ecofeminism Revisited," in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology* (ed. Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Calliot, Karen J. Warren, Irene J. Klaver and John Clark; Upper Dandle River, N.J.: Pearson–Prentice Hall, 2005), 256.

[16] Mary C. Grey, *Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture* (Minneapolis:Fortress Press, 2004), 129.

power to inflict violence on those who disobey him. This image of "punitive and retributive divine power" is harmful and needs to be changed, she argues.[17]

What the above eco–feminists have in common is that traditional theology has consecrated patriarchy, dualisms and images that damage the relationship between humankind and the earth as well as between men and women. They therefore find traditional theology guilty and call for a change. As other groups of theologians have come to this same conclusion, I now turn to the Earth Bible project.

3 The Earth Bible Project

Many scholars have lauded the Earth Bible project as the most important theological endeavour to interpret the Bible from an ecological perspective thus far.[18] Though the project originated in Australia, theologians from various nations and different cultural backgrounds, including Africa, have contributed to the five volumes published to date.[19] Its significance in relation to the present study is that the project recapitulates most of the criticisms I have discussed above, reflecting on White's article and the concerns of eco–feminist theologians. From its inception the project was built on the assumption that Western interpretations of the Bible are at fault where nature is concerned. In an article published by the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), Norman Habel, one of the founders of the project, presents six objectives of the Earth Bible project team. Three of these have caught my attention as they express clearly the underlying philosophy of the project. These are:

(i) to acknowledge, before reading the biblical text, that as Western interpreters we are heirs of a long anthropocentric, patriarchal and androcentric approach to reading the text that has devalued the Earth and that continues to influence the way we read the text;

---

[17] Anne Primavesi, *Gaia and Climate Change: A Theology of Gift Events* (London: Routledge, 2009), 91.

[18] See comments in Gunther Wittenberg, "Part One: Metaphor and Dominion," *OTE* 23/3 (2010): 891–894.

[19] Norman C. Habel, ed., *Reading from the Perspective of the Earth* (vol. 1 of *The Earth Bible*; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, eds., *The Earth Story in Genesis* (vol. 2 of *The Earth Bible*; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, eds., *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions* (vol. 3 of *The Earth Bible*; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Norman C. Habel, ed., *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (vol. 4 of *The Earth Bible*; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Vicky Balabanski and Norman C. Habel, eds., *The Earth Story in the New Testament* (vol. 5 of *The Earth Bible*; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

(ii) to declare, before reading the text, that we are members of a human community that has exploited, oppressed and endangered the existence of the Earth community;

(iii) to develop techniques of reading the text to discern and retrieve alternative traditions where the voice of Earth and Earth community has been suppressed.[20]

In response to the above objectives, the Earth Bible project strongly advocates the retrieving of the voice of the Earth which has often been suppressed either by the Biblical writers or by its interpreters. In this regard the Earth Bible team claims,

> We begin with suspicion that a given text and its interpreters may suppress the voice of Earth. We make no apology for this assertion. Our experience of reading texts and their interpreters from the perspective of Earth confirms the validity of our claim.[21]

Furthermore, the Earth Bible project considers retrieving the "Voice of the Earth" as one of the six principles[22] they use as hermeneutical tools for reading the Bible. The dominant argument in the entire project remains the fact that Earth is treated by Western theology as a commodity and hence is prone to exploitation and abuse. Things would be different if Earth was appreciated as a partner with a "voice."[23] Contributors to the project have also reflected on varied theological stumbling blocks that prevent theologians from adequately addressing ecological problems. Among the most commonly discussed are: human dominion, anthropocentrism, and a negative attitude toward nature.[24]

The criticisms examined thus far have this in common: Western theology has in one way or another contributed to fostering a culture of exploitation of the earth. To further this debate one may wonder whether this failure of theology is unredeemable. Few theologians would answer yes to this question. Most of them approve that there is a way out as I will discuss in the following section.

---

[20] Norman C. Habel, "The Earth Bible Project," *SBL Forum*, n.p. [cited 13 May 2013]. Online: http://www.sbl–site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=291.

[21] The Earth Bible Team, "The Voice of Earth: More than Metaphor?" In *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (vol. 4 of *The Earth Bible*; ed. Norman C. Habel; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 23–24.

[22] (1) The principles of intrinsic worth, (2) the principle of interconnectedness, (3) the principle of voice, (4) the principle of purpose, (5) the principle of mutual custodianship and (6) the principle of resistance.

[23] Earth Bible Team, "Voice of Earth," 28.

[24] See Van Dyk, "Challenges," *OTE* 22/1 (2009): 186–204.

C REDEEMING THEOLOGY

It is important, first of all, to emphasise that the use of the word "redeeming" does not imply that biblical theology has already failed to address ecological problems and that this study attempts to rescue it. On the contrary, the underlying assumption of this study, that many theologians concur with, is that there will be hope for creation once an appropriate theology has been defined and is applied. This explains why an increasing number of theological studies, too many to recall here, are undertaken to address environmental issues. These studies recognise that biblical texts give expression to various voices and represent different possible layers of meaning and ways of reading. Daniel Patte is right when he suggests, "What is needed is a practice of biblical study that accounts for the multiplicity of readings, related to the variety of contexts from which readers read."[25] Therefore, biblical overtones which might have contributed to the current ecological degradation should not be considered as final. The present study supports those whose thesis is that biblical texts should be re–read or re–interpreted in order to unearth principles that overtly engage the protection of all members of God's creation. In the following section I would like to highlight a number of arguments in favour of this thesis.

Starting with the last group of criticisms discussed above, the Earth Bible team cautions that one should not "ignore the fact that the biblical text reflects diverse theologies about the cosmos and God's creation."[26] They acknowledge that by using the metaphor of voice as a hermeneutical tool, readers will be able to retrieve the suppressed voice of the Earth as a subject. Once the voice of Earth is retrieved, Earth should be considered as kin or as partner, deserving human respect and consideration instead of exploitation and abuse. This is well expressed by Shirley Wurst when she identifies the voice of the Earth with the voice of "Woman Wisdom" in the book of Proverbs. This voice calls for "kinship" as a new relationship that should exist among all members of the Earth community.

> In Woman Wisdom's house, young inexperienced men and women learn from Woman Wisdom. They undergo an apprenticeship that will ensure a change in the way they understand themselves and Earth community, in the way they perceive their living as part of Earth community.[27]

---

[25] Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 29.

[26] The Earth Bible Team, "Conversation with Gene Tucker," in *The Earth Story in Genesis* (vol. 2 of *The Earth Bible*; ed. Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 33.

[27] Shirley Wurst, "Woman Wisdom's Way: Ecokinship," in *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions* (vol. 3 of *The Earth Bible*; ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 60.

Despite the negative attitude toward the Earth displayed by a number of biblical texts, the overall message conveyed by Earth Bible contributors is that biblical texts can be re–interpreted in an ecologically friendly manner. Many of them have realised, like Carol Newsom, that "The account of Genesis 2–3, with its rather grim account of the human fall into anthropocentrism, should not, however, be cause for despair in regard to humankind's capacity to transform its practices."[28]

The fact that biblical texts can be re–interpreted to help human beings transcend self–interest for the sake of survival of the earth is also attested to by a number of eco–feminist theologians. The work of Anna Case–Winters that I mentioned earlier is commendable in this regard. She examines different ecological theories proposed by eco–feminists and other theologians in order to reconstruct a Christian theology of nature.[29] She points out that several theological prerequisites need to be addressed, and the good news is that they are all achievable. She concludes her study by articulating a theology of nature based on "A Trinitarian vision of God–World relation (God *with* creation, God *for* creation and God *in* creation)."[30]

Finally in my discussion of the effort to redeem theology I would like to mention the response of Gunther Wittenberg to the challenge raised by Van Dyk.[31] Focusing on criticisms on matters of dominion in Gen 1:28 and Ps 8, Wittenberg suggests that to solve the problem one should rather find a "right metaphor" and not go in search of an ecotheology. After discussing the voice metaphor of the Earth Bible project and God's body of Sallie McFague, Wittenberg proposes that a solution might be found in the metaphor of Christ's role in creation and redemption as described in Paul's hymn to Christology in Col 1:15–20. In this text Christ, image of God *par excellence*, is the Head of the cosmic body and the firstborn of creation, not in domination but connecting everything and reconciling all things with God by emptying himself of all power. Thus, he becomes an alternative to the negative model of domination in Gen 1:28 and Ps 8.[32]

Re–reading biblical texts of violence and abuse for redemptive aims is not unique to eco–theologians. For example, the Circle of Concerned African

---

[28] Carol A. Newsom, "Common Ground: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 2–3," *The Earth Story in Genesis* (vol. 2 of *The Earth Bible*; ed. Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 72.

[29] Case–Winters, *Reconstructing.*

[30] Case–Winters, *Reconstructing*, 145–162.

[31] Gunther Wittenberg, "Part One: Metaphor and Dominion," *OTE 23/2* (2010), 427–453; Gunther Wittenberg, "In Search of the Right Metaphor: A Response to Peet van Dyk's 'Challenges in the Search for an Ecotheology': Part Two: Searching for an Alternative," *OTE* 23/3 (2010): 889–912.

[32] Wittenberg, "Part Two: Searching for an Alternative," 908–911.

Women Theologians (the Circle), together with feminist theologians worldwide, are involved in the re–interpretation of biblical texts to challenge violence against women in churches and traditional cultures. Another example is the Ujamaa Centre which uses its Tamar Campaign to recover redemptive masculinities from widely read texts of terror, hoping to break abuse against women.[33] A question that one may rightly ask is what role will such a redeemed theology play in the current ecological crisis?

D PRIESTLY ROLE OF THEOLOGY FOR THE EARTH

Many of those who deal with ecological problems acknowledge that the current crisis requires a multidisciplinary intervention. Scientists, lawmakers, political and religious leaders, as well as "ordinary people" are mobilised and act, each in his or her capacity for the survival of the earth. However, theology has a specific and vital role to play as I shall demonstrate it in the following section where I will discuss the priestly role and what differentiates it from the prophetic voice of the Church. I will also look at challenges posed to the priestly role, internally and externally, by the church and by the world at large.

1 What is a Priestly Role?

The priesthood did not exist during the period of the patriarchs as each head of the family acted as a priest. It was instituted as an office at Mount Sinai (Exod 29; Lev 8) and together with the Law and the Tabernacle, as part of Yahweh's Covenant with the Israelites (Exod 25–40). There are many instances of readers who think of sacrifices and burnt offerings as the primary function of priests in the HB. This narrow conception comes from the rendering of the Hebrew word כֹּהֵן (*sacrificateur* in French) and its equivalents in other languages which restricts the duty of priests to cultic activities. But their job covers a much wider field. This is why priesthood survived even when there was no cultic activity in the Temple. Most priestly duties were designed in relation to the priests' role as mediators between Yahweh and his people. According to Mark Leuchter, "Priests were thus the representatives of the People to YHWH, but priest also stood as representatives of YHWH to the people."[34] In their mediatorial function, priests were also giving God's oracles in forms of divination, prediction or any answer to someone's inquiry. Though the techniques changed over the years, often priests used objects such as Urim, Thummim, ephod and teraphim to inquire from Yahweh (Num 27:21, Judg 17:5; Hos 3:4). Nevertheless, people continued to consult priests for answers even after these objects had disappeared.

---

[33] See their homepage at UJAMAA, "Ujama Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research," n.p. [cited 5 August 2013]. Online: http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Homepage.aspx.

[34] Mark A. Leuchter, "The Priesthood in Ancient Israel," *BTB* 40/2 (2010): 100–110.

To perform the mediation and to act as guardians of the Law and of all sacred things, priests were required to observe high standards of purity and holiness. They were subjected to special regulations concerning clothing (Exod 28; Lev 8), washing (Exod 30:17–21; 40:31–32), restricted choice of partners in marriage (Lev 21:7, Ezek 44:22) and a number of abstinences such as drinking wine and, in general fermented beverages while on duty (Lev 10:8–10; Ezek 44:21), or attending funerals and touching corpses (Lev 21:1–6). Priests did not answer to a calling like prophets (Jer 1:4–10; Amos 7:14–15) but were appointed as professionals or experts. While Aaronic priesthood was instituted by Yahweh, the history of Israel shows that many priests were appointed by kings such as David (2 Sam 6; 8), Solomon (1 Kgs 4) and Jeroboam (1 Kgs 12:32). Priests were anointed as were the kings, in other words they were consecrated (Exod 28:41; 29:7, 21; Lev 21:10) and "made holy" before the community. This made them to be in charge of anything regarded as sacred by Israelites.

More important for this article and in relation with the *Torah* (instruction), one of the most important of their duties was to instruct the people. Leuchter argues that "It was the priest who had been trained in the mysteries of the divine and thus granted access to inner workings of the universe in a manner that common Israelites could never encounter."[35] The nature of priestly instructions was diverse. It included teaching and interpreting the Law as messengers of Yahweh (Lev 10:11; Deut 17:9–12). They taught people what was considered clean and unclean in their daily life, referring to diet (Lev 11), diseases (Lev 13), and human relationships (Lev 12). Priests had the knowledge of the requirements for various types of sacrifices (Lev 1– 7) and festivals (Lev 23). They declared the acceptance of sacrifice, the healing and restoration of those who were banned for uncleanness. The function of priests gave them the right to act as judges and settle lawsuits, manslaughter and bodily injury (Deut 17:8–13).[36] Without priestly instruction or failure to comply with the *Torah* , the land refused to yield its blessings to Israel or eventually Israel lost its place on God's land (Deut 28). Therefore, compliance to priestly instructions was crucial because it determined the state of being in or out of the land for Israel. Through rituals and observance of God's commandments and statutes, for which priests were custodians, Israel would enjoy the harmony with and blessings from nature.

The limited scope of this study does not allow expanding on a wide–ranging topic of priesthood in the HB as the office experienced frequent modifications due to ever changing political and religious systems in Israel over the

---

35 Leuchter, "Priesthood," 101.

36 Read more on legal matter in Chapter 8 of Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250–587 B.C.E.* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson Publishers, 2005), 110–120.

years. However, this brief introduction ushers us closer to answering the question, what role theology should play in the current ecological crisis.

2 Theological Priesthood

Many actors in the search for solutions to ecological problems expect a significant input from religion in general. This is clearly stated in the declaration of the Global Forum in Moscow where scientists appeal to religious leaders to get involved in finding solution to the ecological tragedy threatening the world. They urge,

> As scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as **sacred** is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the **sacred** (bold mine).[37]

Scientists, by recommending a vision of the "sacred" toward the environment, seem to point at what role they expect religious leaders present at that forum to play. The Oxford Dictionary of English defines the word "sacred" as "connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration." It adds, "Regarded as too valuable to be interfered with, sacrosanct." All these adjectives describe how human beings should consider nature. From the biblical perspective of the HB only priests had the knowledge and expertise of how to deal with sacred things. The current crisis thus is an indication that humanity has not properly dealt with nature as being sacred. Hence, the priests or theologians are to instruct the world how to restore harmony within the wider tripod—Yahweh–earth–humans. This is the actual challenge that lies ahead for biblical theology all over the world.

The number of relevant studies undertaken by theological institutions in Africa today and by certain individuals in particular, demonstrates that there is an awakening in this regard.[38] However, the task is immense and requires the mobilisation of African Christianity in its entirety for the preservation of the earth. This study assumes that the momentum would be reached once the responsibility attached to theological priestly roles is understood. One should learn from ancient Israel that when priests failed to teach God's will, the Israelites lost their land. Many prophets came to the rescue and called on professionals (Priests and Kings) to fulfil their duties and prevent the people from being cast out of the land. For example, Amos confronted the priest of Bethel

---

[37] Suzuki and Moola, "Global Forum." At the conference, 271 spiritual leaders from 83 countries—patriarchs, lamas, chief rabbis, cardinals, mullahs, archbishops, and professors of theology—added their names to the document.

[38] Ernst Conradie's books and the African Earthkeepers movement are an example of how the African continent is responding to ecological challenges.

Amaziah (Amos 7:10–17). Hosea severely charged priests for forsaking knowledge and for leading the people into deadly ignorance (Hos 4:4–14; 5:1). The list includes oracles of Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zephaniah and other prophets who all scorned priests for failing to teach the Law in order to avert the exile. It is not by accident that the prophetic movement in Israel proliferated at a time of divided kingdoms when both priesthood and kingship were on the decline and under threat of captivity. This brings me to open a bracket and say a word about the prophetic voice of theology.

3 Is the Prophetic Voice Different From the Priestly Role?

There were in ancient Israel a lot of overlap between the functions of prophet and priest. Both were God's mediators, telling people about God's will, predicting events for people and teaching the Law. While many prophets were called by God, their office was not permanent and not hereditary. Few of the prophets had had a standing position in a king's palace or in the Temple, but the majority of writing prophets of Israel performed their ministries in response to a special call from Yahweh and in specific situations. Roland de Vaux observes that a prophet in Israel was a man of word, a spokesman of YHWH directly inspired by God to give a particular message in definite circumstances, whereas a priest was the man of *Torah* (knowledge) entrusted to him for interpretation and practice.[39] Prophets were used to warn people and leaders who disobeyed God or to predict calamities or restoration, depending whether people reacted positively or negatively to warnings. However, priests were professionals and agents of transformation, holding a permanent office. They were themselves the targets of many prophecies, as mentioned earlier, because they were responsible for the downfall of society, especially as far as their instruction of God's will was concerned. In the course of the history of Israel both prophecy and priesthood cannot be considered as having been homogenous because of the multiple changes of status the people experienced.

In the context of this study I want to confirm that the prophetic denunciation is important to raise the alarm about the danger created by contemporary environmental degradation. But theologians should move from theoretical denouncement to practical instructions concerning the sacredness of nature. One should consider the increasing warnings from environmental scientists and the media as prophetic voices concerning the crisis. In reaction to this global crisis theologians and the Christian church in general are slowly being involved in spreading environmental awareness. This study advocates that the prophetic voice of theologians should not address scientists and politicians alone, but mostly the religious community, so that they may assume their priestly role and instruct the world concerning the sacredness of nature. This can be illustrated by the manner theologians have reacted to the scourge of HIV and AIDS in

[39] Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. J. McHugh; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), 354–355.

Africa. There has been a strong prophetic voice to change the attitude of the Church from condemning those living with the virus as sinners, into their acceptance as brothers and sisters in the Lord in need of help. But over the years there has been a shift from a prophetic role of informing the population about the nature of the disease and its consequences to a priestly role of engagement in being in charge of survivors of HIV and AIDS. Today in Africa, church institutions and organisations have taken the lead among those providing care and treatment to people living with HIV and AIDS. Thus far, African theology has not yet reached this same level of engagement as regard to the ecological threat to humanity. What are the challenges in this respect?

4 Challenges to a Priestly Role

Any institution faced with an intervention of global magnitude would have to overcome certain challenges before it could swing into action. In the process of redeeming priesthood so that it may make a significant contribution towards solving the ecological crisis, the challenges are of an internal as well as an external nature.

4a Internal Challenges

It is not common to claim a priestly role because many theologians regard anything which is priestly with suspicion. A number of biblical texts attributed to priestly writers have raised polemics between scholars. As priests are guardians of the Law, priestly documents are mostly prescriptive on issues that today are hotly debated. For example, in their attempt to preserve the holiness of Israel, priestly traditions go as far as excluding non–Israelites from participating to the construction of the Second Temple, attending the rituals and even repudiating foreign women and their children (See Ezra–Nehemiah). In their attempts of systematisation, priestly writers are accused of squeezing the entire creation into six days in order to uphold the Sabbath rest of Yahweh on the seventh day. This same creation account contains in Gen 1:28 the amply contested text that consecrated the dominion of humankind over nature. Those who locate the priestly writings in the postexilic period claim that P writers have projected the reality of postexilic cultic systems back into the early history of Israel, altering the simplicity of the Tabernacle with a load of devices which were created later.[40]

There has been also frequent collapses of the priesthood that many scholars consider the office as a failure. For example, during the period of Judges the priesthood was dysfunctional so that a Levite became a priest of Mica's idol (Judg 17). This degeneration culminated with the death of the Priest Eli and his sons and the Ark of Covenant captured by the Philistines (1

[40] Cf. Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio–Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 469–482.

Sam 4). Later on when Jeroboam and Rehoboam split the Israelite monarchy into two, each appointed priests who were loyal to his cause. In the Southern Kingdom the priesthood continued to defend the Davidic dynasty and the Temple of Jerusalem as the approved sanctuary to the exclusion of people of the North. On the other hand, Jeroboam in the North appointed his own priests who mixed the worship of Yahweh with the cult of Baal and other foreign divinities. During the Second Temple period there were conflicts between the Levites, Aaronides and Zadokites about "whether all Levites could serve as priests or, alternatively, if only certain branches of Levitical line (the Aaronides and the Zadokites) were qualified for the priestly office."[41]

Nevertheless, this negative portrayal of the priesthood should not be a hindrance for theologians to move forward. It is possible to retrieve positive priesthood from this dark image, which explains why people have maintained the institution to date through church ministers and the Jewish rabbinic system. Still, there are other challenges to be dealt with.

4b External Challenges

As discussed above, the tackling of the current ecological problems requires a multidisciplinary approach. For theology to play a pivotal role in this enterprise, it needs to widen the scope of its intervention to embrace areas of which it has little or no knowledge. Moreover, the concept of sacredness of the Land in Africa is not limited to Christianity. There is a need to work in collaboration with a wider religious community, including African Initiated churches (AICs), traditional religious groups and other organisations interested in the protection of the environment who all pay respect to nature. A meaningful contribution in this context would require theologians to stand as well informed and knowledgeable partners in order to argue with confidence that the earth is sacred, therefore it should be handled with care and deference. Many African communities believe that no one can trample on nature without endangering the harmony that binds creation and God/divinities. Theology can attain the necessary boldness of attitude only after a thorough study of biblical texts in consultation with the expertise and data gathered by environmental sciences.

The duties, described above, that a priest in Israel had to fulfil, are an indication of the amount of knowledge an ecological priest of today has to acquire in order to function efficiently. In addition to theology, law and divination art, an Israelite priest's training would have involved knowledge of the contemporary equivalent of life science and of medicine. Currently, in view of our tendency to specialisation, it would be difficult for any individual to obtain knowledge in all these fields, but there certainly are possibilities to work as a

[41] Ryan Bonfiglio, "Priests and Priesthood in the Hebrew Bible," *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, n.p. [cited 6 March 2014]. Online: http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/resource/priests.xhtml.

team with people of different capacities and expertise in order to rise up to the challenges.

E CONCLUSION

In this article I have discussed the redeeming of the priestly role of theology in order to contribute to the search for solutions to the current ecological crisis. As the root cause of the crisis is located in the heart of human beings, theology should be considered an appropriate tool for affecting the necessary inner–transformation. However, as I have shown, theology has been subjected to serious charges which cripple its efforts to intervene. Examples are accusations by Lynn White that the Judeo–Christian tradition bears the responsibility for the abuse of the earth because it consecrates the dominion of human beings over nature. Furthermore, eco–feminists have established a link between the abuse of women and the exploitation of nature as both are victims of a dualistic Western theology that has classified paired elements whereby the one dominates and controls the other. I have also indicated that the Earth Bible Project locates the cause of the exploitation of the Earth in the suppression of Earth's voice, allowing humankind to treat it as object rather than subject.

However, authors making these criticisms are all convinced that the trends can be reversed by rethinking or re–interpreting theology in a way sensitive to nature. The voice of the earth can be retrieved and a metaphor of dominion can be replaced by the metaphor of the cosmic Jesus who is the image of God by reconciling everything on earth and in heaven rather than dominating nature, as suggested by Gunther Wittenberg.

Finally, I have advocated that theologians can make a significant contribution by working in collaboration with various religious groups and organisations to assert the sacredness of nature for the preservation and sustainability of the entire creation. For this reason, theology has to overcome the suspicious view of contemporary scholars on the priestly role and strive towards broader knowledge and expertise.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Balabanski, Vicky and Norman C. Habel, eds. *The Earth Story in the New Testament*. Volume 5 of *The Earth Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.

Bonfiglio, Ryan. "Priests and Priesthood in the Hebrew Bible." No pages in *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*. Cited 6 March 2014. Online: http://www .oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/resource/priests.xhtml.

Bouma–Prediger, Steven. *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jurgen Moltmann.* Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995.

Case–Winters, Anna. *Reconstructing a Christian Theology of Nature: Down to Earth*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007.

De Vaux, Roland. *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions.* Translated by J. McHugh. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976.

Gottwald, Norman K. *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio–Literary Introduction.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.

Grey, Mary C. *Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.

Habel, Norman C., ed. *Reading from the Perspective of the Earth*. Volume 1 of *The Earth Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

_____, ed. *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*. Volume 4 of *The Earth Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001

Habel, Norman C. and Shirley Wurst, eds. *The Earth Story in Genesis*. Volume 2 of *The Earth Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

_____, eds. *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*. Volume 3 of *The Earth Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.

Habel, Norman C. "The Earth Bible Project." *SBL Forum*. No pages. Cited 13 May 2013. Online: http://www.sbl–site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=291.

Leuchter, Mark A. "The Priesthood in Ancient Isreal." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 40/2 (2010): 100–110.

Matthews, Victor H. and Don C. Benjamin. *Social World of Ancient Israel:1250–587 B.C.E.* Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson Publishers, 2005.

Newsom, Carol A. "Common Ground: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 2–3." Pages 61–72 in *The Earth Story in Genesis*. Volume 2 of *The Earth Bible*. Edited by Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

Patte, Daniel. *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation,* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

Primavesi, Anne. *Gaia and Climate Change: A Theology of Gift Events.* London: Routledge, 2009.

Ruether, Rosemary R. *Sexism and God–Talk.* London: SCM Press, 1983.

Suzuki, David and Faisal Moola. "Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival in Moscow, Moscow Conference 1990." No Pages. Cited 16 May 2013. Online: http://www.davidsuzuki.org/blogs/science–matters/2010/07/protecting–the–planet–is–a–sacred–and–scientific–duty/.

The Earth Bible Team. "The Voice of Earth: More than Metaphor?" Pages 23–24 in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*. Volume 4 of *The Earth Bible*. Edited by Norman C. Habel. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.

_____. "Conversation with Gene Tucker." Page 33 in *The Earth Story in Genesis*. Volume 2 of *The Earth Bible*. Edited by Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

UJAMAA. "Ujama Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research." No Pages. Cited 5 August 2013. Online: http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za /Homepage.aspx

Van Dyk, Peet J. "Challenges in the Search for an Ecotheology." *Old Testament Essays* 22/1 (2009): 186–204.

_____. "Eco–Theology and Losing the Sacred." *Old Testament Essays* 23/3 (2010): 822–833.

Warren, Karen. "The Power and the Promise of Ecofeminism Revisited." Pages 252–279 In *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*.

Edited by Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Calliot, Karen J. Warren, Irene J. Klaver and John Clark. Upper Dandle River, N.J.: Pearson–Prentice Hall, 2005.

White, Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science Magazine* 155 (1967): 1203–1207.

_____. "Appendix 1: The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." Pages 70–85 in *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology.* Edited by Francis A. Shaeffer. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970.

Wittenberg, Gunther. "In Search of the Right Metaphor: A Response to Peet van Dyk's 'Challenges in the Search for an Ecotheology': Part One: Metaphor and Dominion." *Old Testament Essays* 23/2 (2010): 427–453.

_____. "In Search of the Right Metaphor: A Response to Peet van Dyk's 'Challenges in the Search for an Ecotheology': Part Two: Searching for an Alternative." *Old Testament Essays* 23/3 (2010): 889–912.

Wurst, Shirley. "Woman Wisdom's Way: Ecokinship." Pages 49–64 in *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*. Volume 3 of *The Earth Bible*. Edited by Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.

Zimmerman, Michael E. "General Introduction to the Fourth Edition." Pages 1–4 in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Edited by Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Calliot, Karen J. Warren, Irene J. Klaver and John Clark. Upper Dandle River, N.J.: Pearson–Prentice Hall, 2005.

Dr. Lubunga W'Ehusha, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of KwaZulu–Natal, P.O.Box 1018, Pietermaritzburg, 3200. *Email*: lubungaw@yahoo.com or lwehusha@gmail.com.