

The Good Creation: An Ecowomanist Reading of Genesis 1-2

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ABSTRACT

In his creative activity recorded in Gen 1-2, God interacts with a formless, chaotic, space. It is stated that God began to speak things into being and that at the completion of everything he created; God saw that it was "all" good. As a Motswana woman, I see in God's concluding remarks a hope for the future. In a world characterized by panic due to the impending ecological decline and crisis, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of all things. One can safely conclude that God loves all his creation, human, animate and inanimate. However due to the patriarchal structures of our world, there has been domination over women and the natural world. The structures of suppression and abuse of the women by men have modelled into those of humans over non-humans. In this paper I endeavour to show that there is an interconnection between the oppression of women, in particular black women and the subjugation of the ecosystem leading to its depletion. My argument is that there is need to re-visit the idea of an "overall" good creation. Domination over women, land and animals is against the creator's vision of a good world. An appreciation of women across all cultures, classes, races, sexual orientations etcetera, as part of the good creation can be a starting point for an appreciation and care of all God has created.

KEYWORDS: Creation, Genesis, Ecowomanist, Ecological, Patriarchal and Domination.

A INTRODUCTION

It seems reasonable to begin by explaining the methodology employed in this paper. The exercise is meant to orientate the reader to understand the backdrop against which my reading and interpretation of Gen 1 and 2 is based. Ecowomanist reading may be defined as a multidimensional approach that seeks to read texts in the light of the intersection between the domination over black women and other women of colour and the domination over and abuse of nature. It is a combination of a womanist and an ecological theory. It is built on the same principles as what led to the birth of womanism¹ and hence is closely

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related to ecofeminism whose aim as defined by Ruether is "to examine the interconnections between the domination over women and nature in order to liberate or heal these interconnected dominations by better understanding of their aetiology and enforcement."² To borrow the words of Nancy Howell in her definition of ecofeminism, ecowomanism is the womanist theory and activism that is informed by ecology.³ However ecowomanism goes further to incorporate more specifically the domination over black women and other women of colour and how such domination is interconnected with the domination over nature. It allows a space for biblical texts to be read and interpreted in the light of multiple oppressions experienced specifically by black and other non-white women which include: racism, sexism, classism, and other sexual orientations outside of the dominant heterosexuality⁴ and how these have modelled into the abuse of nature and the natural world.⁵

The paper therefore, seeks to explore the intersection and interconnection between the subjugation of women (especially black women and other women of colour) and the subjugation of the natural world leading to its deterioration. The text of Gen 1-2 will be read to see to what extent its message has, at one level, contributed to both the domination over women and nature and how the same text, at another level, may offer a liberative message in the

¹ Womanism and / the womanist theory was born out of a dissatisfaction with feminism and / the feminist theory. As previous studies show, the former was advanced by white women, but in their efforts to debunk male supremacy they failed to advance the concerns and experiences of their black and other non-white sisters. Therefore the latter came in as a complementary in order to extend the parameters of the former to include specifically issues pertinent to other women outside of the White/Western world and culture. See studies by Margret D. Kamitsuka, "Reading the Raced and Sexed Body in Colour Purple: Repattening White Feminist and Womanist Theological Hermeneutics," *JFSR* 19/2 (2003): 45-66; Madipoane Masenya, "A Bosadi (Womanhood) Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Geneva: WCC, 2003), 145-157.

² Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology," *DEP* 20 (2012): 22-33.

³ Nancy R. Howell, "Ecofeminism: What One Needs to Know," *Zygon* 32/2 (1997): 231-241.

⁴ Scholars have indicated that heterosexuality has been a dominant paradigm which has been used to judge against other sexual orientations outside of itself. For instance, Kamitsuka, "Reading," 45-66. Nyasha Junior, "Womanist Biblical Interpretation," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Interpretation in Honour of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld* (ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 37-47.

⁵ Monica Coleman, "Process Thought and Womanist Theology: Black Women's Science Fiction as a Resource for Process Theology," pages 1-19 [cited 5th September 2015]. Online: www.ctr4process.org/publication/ProcessPerspective/archievePP-26.2-Spring2003.pdf.

same regard. It is the positive message of Gen 1-2 that seems appealing to the current situation in which as stated by one scholar:

. . .the Earth, our Mother Nature, has seen devastating changes, and the ecosystem in a vicious circle has been suffering myriads of ecological disasters, natural or human, manufacturing pollution, global warming, expanding population, acid rain, deforestation, desertification, irregular earthquakes and eruption of volcanoes, ozone layer depletion and melting of polar glaciers, under which circumstance the human beings' dwelling on earth and all creatures at large thus have been in danger and under hazards as well.⁶

In the same vein Mark Edwards *et al.* also maintain that there is growing global environmental crises with profound implications for the long-term viability and welfare of natural environments and human social and economic systems.⁷ Consequently issues of ecological nature are progressively taking centre stage in many meetings, workshops and seminars throughout the world. This in itself is indicative of the seriousness of the imminent ecological decline that is happening at an alarmingly fast speed overtaking efforts to halt or reverse the crisis. This paper seeks to suggest that the biblical text, in this case Gen 1-2, read from an ecowomanist perspective, might have something of value to add to the possible solutions regarding the impending ecological crisis.

B GENESIS 1 AND 2

The creation accounts of Gen 1 and Gen 2 are especially intriguing. In both chapters there is an overarching idea that runs repeatedly across. This is the expression at the end of every creative activity, namely, "God saw that it was good." In summary "God looked at everything he had made; it was good, so very good" (Gen 1: 31a). It is important to note that there is a slight difference in the two chapters concerning especially the creation of humankind. In Gen 1: 27-28 it reads thus:

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

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." (NIV).

⁶ Jingcheng Xu and Meifang Nan Gong, "A Study of the Social Ecological Wisdom in H.W. Longfellow's Poetry," *TPLS* 2/1 (2012): 24-30.

⁷ Mark Edwards, et al., "Big Picture Wisdom: Metatheorising Ancient, Scientific and Indigenous Wisdom Perspectives for Global Environmental Leadership," *JSLM* 7/1 (2013): 13-32.

However in Gen 2:18, 20-23 we encounter a slight inconsistency in the following:

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. (NIV).

The question is which version of the creation of human gendered bodies, namely male and female, should one go by? Was the male gendered body created first as suggested in Gen 2 above or were the two gendered bodies, male and female, created simultaneously as stated in Gen 1? As already noted, the paper seeks to investigate what in the creation accounts of Gen 1 and Gen 2 might have instigated or perpetuated the inequality between humans as gendered male and female, and between human and non-human. The inconsistency in the creation of humankind noted above may have undoubtedly played an important role in the inequality between men and women, to the detriment of the latter. The point will be revisited briefly in what follows in order to set the stage for the argument of this paper.

C THE CREATION OF EVE, THE FEMALE GENDERED "OTHER"

A quite problematic issue that has most likely contributed to the inequality between men and women is the creation of man and woman in the account of Gen 2:18-23 which claims that the male gendered human body was created first and that the female gendered human body was created second out of the male's body and for his sake. The woman was created as an עֵזֶר that is, a "helper," or "supporter."⁸ An interesting point has been raised by Carolyn C. James with regard to the issue when she insists that:

Eve's forgotten legacy resides in explicit statements God made when he created her. First, God created Eve to be his image bearer "in his image and likeness" -and second, to be the *ezer*, or the strong helper. Furthermore, she shared with Adam what theologians call the "Cultural Mandate" – God's command to be fruitful and multiply, to rule and subdue the earth.⁹

James tellingly implies, though indirectly, that neither Gen 1 nor Gen 2 presumes some inequality between the human gendered bodies of men and

⁸ See also Isa 30:5 and Exod 18:4.

⁹ Carolyn Custis James, *Lost Women of the Bible: The Women We Thought We Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005): 31.

women. None of the two is superior over the other. If anything, a woman's role as assigned at creation is quite vital to the entire scenario of multiplication as a mandate to humanity from God. Thus, as an *ezer* "helper" she has a shared duty with her male other, that of reproduction which may not be done by either one on their own. According to such a perspective, failure to become equal partners as men and women may render humanity a failure to "multiply and fill the earth." Therefore, it makes sense to suggest that contrary to the dominant patriarchal structure of our world, God's plan at creation was to have humanity in two equal genders of male and female, both in his image and likeness. Pursuing a somewhat radical slant one woman once said "we (i.e. women) are the root from which the whole people sustains itself and grows."¹⁰ While the statement may be a bit exaggerated, the underlying point is that women are not inferior to men. My conviction is that men need women as much as women need men according to God's creation in Gen 1 and Gen 2. Therefore I maintain that there is no room for gender inequality in God's plan of things.

It is important to note the above argument as it echoes and alludes to the gist and focus of the argument raised in this paper. That is, inequality between the human gendered bodies of man and woman, as represented in Adam and Eve in the stories of creation considered here, is unjustifiable and unsupported by neither Gen 1 nor Gen 2. Nonetheless it is not within the scope of this present paper to dwell too deep into the specific issue of the subordination of women resulting from or perpetuated by the creation accounts of Gen 1 and Gen 2 and hence the paper will proceed to call attention to yet another factor that seems problematic in the two accounts of creation in so far as the ecowomanist reading is concerned.

D PROBLEMATIC VOCABULARY – OR IS IT?

When reading closely between the lines of the creative accounts of Gen 1 and Gen 2, it seems inevitable to read with suspicion. It will not be an exaggeration to conclude that some of the words and phrases used in these accounts have perpetuated and even encouraged the inequalities that have to this day continued to prove problematic in relation to the relationships between races, cultures, sexes, sexual orientations and sadder still, between humanity and the non-human or the environment. I endeavour to explore, albeit scantily, some of the words and phrases that may prove problematic in so far as an eco-womanist reading of Gen 1 and Gen 2 is concerned. For instance, consider the Hebrew term *כבש* "dominion,"¹¹ or "make subservient" and worse still "violate or

¹⁰ Those were the words of a peasant woman in a workshop on the rights of women held at Santa Ana, El Salvador quoted in the essay by Mercedes Canas, "In Us Life Grows: An Ecofeminist Point of View," in *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion* (ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 24-28.

¹¹ See Jer 34:16; 34:11; Esth 7:8 (violate/rape; be subjugated in reference to land e.g.

rape"¹² as well as רדה to "subdue" which we find in the mandate given to the first human beings in relation to the rest of God's creation. God commands the first human beings in the following words in both texts:

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. (NIV).

It is worthwhile noting that the word כבש "dominion" which seems to be at the centre of patriarchy and perhaps at the heart of every structure of domination, is but one part of the overall instruction given to the first human beings at creation. There are other key words however, that may be noted as equally important in the said instruction. These will include words like: 1) פרה be fruitful/bear fruit;¹³ 2) רבה be many/multiply/increase;¹⁴ 3) and the phrase וּמְלֵא אֶת־הָאָרֶץ i.e. and fill the earth.¹⁵

Of the above words, the word כבש "dominion" seems to have indeed dominated the rest of the abovementioned others that actually precede it in the very instruction. One wonders why? The answer to the question is not an easy one. It is worth noting that the structure of domination begins with the domination of women by men. According to Ruether, women in many traditional societies were subjugated and confined to the roles of reproduction, childbearing and childcare and productive work of turning raw materials of nature into consumer goods while being denied access to formal education, ownership and control of property and political powers of the ruling group (obviously men), whose roles were identified with human transcendence over nature.¹⁶ Therefore the system of the domination over women was rooted in a larger patriarchal hierarchical system of control over land, animals and slaves as property to monopolize wealth and knowledge.¹⁷ As for black women, the subjugation intensified further as captured by Awa Thiam when she asserts boldly that "women are the Blacks of the human race. Can they tell us then who are the Black women? Blacks of the Blacks of the human race?"¹⁸ That is, black women appear at the very bottom in the hierarchy of domination and oppression so that "if humankind has been conceived as 'man' to the exclusion of women, 'woman' has been conceived as White women to the exclusion of

¹² See Jer 34:16; 34:11; Esth 7:8 (violate/rape); be subjugated in reference to land e.g. Num 32: 22 and be degraded, sexually as in Neh 5:5.

¹³ See Gen 26: 22; Deut 29: 17.

¹⁴ See Gen 7:17; 26:22; Ps 49: 17 and Judg 9:29.

¹⁵ See Exod 15:9 and 2 Kgs 4:6.

¹⁶ Ruether, "Ecofeminism."

¹⁷ Ruether, "Ecofeminism," 22.

¹⁸ Awa Thiam, "Black Sister Speakout: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa," in *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (ed. Clenora Hudson-Weems; Troy, Mich.: Bedford Publishers, 1993): 1.

women of African Descent."¹⁹ Thus it is safe to conclude that, given the status and place of black women and other non-white women in the domination ladder suggested above, they are almost identical with that which is non-human and hence almost in the same rank as nature.

Expressing similar sentiments, Ruether maintains that women's inferiorization to men is modelled after the inferiorization of non-human nature to "man."²⁰ She further maintains convincingly that the term "man" itself is to be understood as an androcentric false generic which actually refers to the elite male as the normative human being.²¹ In such a scenario, women, slaves and peoples of other races and cultures are seen as lesser humans and as standing between mind and body, human and animal.²² The interconnection between the subordination of women, other races, cultures, classes and non-heterosexual others, means according to Ruether that women cannot be treated as a univocal (having only one meaning) category.²³ The statement adds well to the ecowomanist perspective that asks, if black women are at the bottom of the hierarchy in the ladder of domination, how much closer are they then to the non-human nature? In simpler terms, ecofeminist theology as well as an ecowomanist reading, assert that there is a close interconnection between the inferiorization of women in general with that of the non-human, natural world so that for as long as men see themselves as the superior of the human race, white men would be at the top of that hierarchy, followed by white women, then black men and black women at the very bottom followed only by that which is non-human.

E THERE IS A PROBLEM

To borrow the words of Vandana Shiva, I am convinced that the two main issues raised above, those of the command to have dominion, and the idea that "woman" was created second, have polarized and dichotomized all of life and society and have created some form of affluence for the powerful and some forms of deprivation and dispossession for the weak and powerless.²⁴ Male gendered bodies have throughout the world past and present held the view that they are the superior others and the female gendered ones are the inferior and weaker ones. Consequently, the polarization of the sexed humanity has led to the sad contemporary status of gender based violence and inequality which has

¹⁹ Karen Baker-Fletcher, "Womanism, Afro-Centrism and the Reconstruction of Black Womanhood," *JITC* 22/2 (1995): 183-197.

²⁰ Ruether, "Ecofeminism," 2.

²¹ Ruether, "Ecofeminism," 2.

²² Ruether, "Ecofeminism," 2.

²³ Ruether, "Ecofeminism," 2.

²⁴ Shiva Vandana, "Let Us Survive: Women, Ecology and Development," in *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion* (ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 61-72.

become somewhat a pandemic across the world. Unfortunately the same has modelled into violence against nature and the natural world, that which is "other" than human.

Nonetheless, while there is perceivable trouble instigated by the above mentioned issues, I wish to contend that read against the overall background of the whole of the divine activity of creation there is something much more constructive that recurs throughout the process of creation. According to Gen 1-2, in the six days of creation, the creator, God, would reflect at the end of each day and at each created being/thing, animate and inanimate, and he always concluded that everything was good. Therefore I believe that we should concern ourselves with the questions of "what does goodness mean?" What does it imply and what is its significance with regard to the relationship between the creator himself and all of his creation? Further still, what is the significance of the said goodness with regard to the relationship between human beings themselves, as male and female as well as between human beings and the rest of creation: animals, plants, land and seas, birds and everything that exists? There is something that needs attention in the idea of an overall good creation. That is, there will be liberation for all of creation if human beings could ponder the view that in "all things" there is divine goodness as suggested by the creator at the end of every creative activity as suggested by Gen 1-2.

F GOODNESS AS AN INHERENT VALUE IN ALL CREATION: HOPE FOR JUSTICE

The starting point for an ecowomanist reading of the creation account of Gen 1 and Gen 2 is an appreciation of the overt inherent goodness in all of God's creation. God created land and sea, plants, trees, animals, birds and all living creatures including the crown of his creation: humankind in two sexes, male and female. Importantly he saw that it was all good. The first impression is that God obviously loves every bit of his creation and hence the statement at every stage "he saw that it was good." Moreover, there is need to remember that God commanded all of his creation to increase, multiply, reproduce and fill its specific place and space. For instance, to the sea creatures he said "be fruitful and increase and fill the waters in the seas, let the birds of the air increase and to human beings he added subdue the earth and have dominion over the rest of my creation (Gen 1: 22 and 28).

In the preceding discussion I have highlighted that due to the patriarchal structures of our world there has been a lot of subjugation that starts with male humans subjugating females and spilling down to non-human subjugation. There is a close connection between gender based violence and violence against nature: animals, land, natural resources that are somewhat raped for the selfish enrichment of the powerful and the rich. We are also aware of the threat of the imminent collapse of the natural world, sustainable life, liveability and habitability on planet earth. The question is why are all these things happening?

Have we lost the basics concerning our main mandate as humanity? We had been given the mandate to reproduce and fill the earth, but have we not concerned ourselves mainly to dominate, to rape and to subdue all of creation? If so, what do we think of the idea that in everything he created, God saw goodness?

G CONCLUSION

It takes a bit of perspective to understand the entire scenario. First, human beings need to acknowledge that we were created in two sexes, as female and male, reflecting two sides of a whole; God in his image and likeness. We need to do away with the gender based inequality between women and men. The said inequality has led our world to unnecessary hostility and to the detriment of black women and other women of colour. The female other has been exposed to all kinds of gender based ills that violate the inherent goodness couched within the image and likeness of God. Thus the inequality between women and men is the starting point for all the inequalities that have come to plague our world. The result of gender based inequality is a drift away from the goodness and beauty envisioned for the world by the creator God at the beginning of all things.

Consequently, the promotion of equality between the sexed or gendered bodies has the potential to lead to equality between all peoples across cultures, races, colours, religions, classes and sexual orientations and preferences. Conversely, as long as the male others continue to think that they are superior over the female others, we are far from achieving our goal in terms of appreciating everything and everyone around us. That is, if there is failure to see goodness and beauty in the "other" one of our own kind as human beings how can we ever expect to see goodness in that which is completely "other": non-human nature. If men could begin to see inherent goodness in women, who are their own kind, in the name of humanity, and treat them as equal partners we would have no problem accepting those others who are not of the same sexual orientation, social class, race, religion *etcetera*. The stance would be a step in the right direction; humanity would be on the way of seeing goodness as intended by the creator in all his creation. The end result would be, a just world in which everyone matters, natural resources are harnessed for the good of all. Nature, that is, animate and inanimate creatures will be appreciated as having goodness inherent in them and hence would be nurtured and not raped by the powerful for their selfish wants, and hence creation would become as God envisioned it, "all good." The current ecological issues would become a thing of the past.

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