


Land as divine inheritance: An ecological analysis of Leviticus 25:23 in the context of Papuan local wisdom

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The global ecological crisis has intensified debates about religion's role in environmental degradation. Although Christianity has been accused of encouraging exploitative views of nature, biblical theology offers constructive foundations for ecological ethics. This study develops an ecotheological reflection on land as God's possession based on Leviticus 25:23, interpreted in dialogue with Papuan local wisdom. The research stands at the intersection of biblical theology, ecotheology and Papuan cultural traditions, particularly *Hak Ulayat* [customary land ownership], *Ondofolo* [the highest customary leader] leadership and cultural symbols such as the *noken* [traditional woven bag]. Using a qualitative–theological approach through biblical hermeneutics, exegetical reading, ecotheological literature and contextual cultural analysis, the findings reveal two ethical dimensions in Leviticus 25:23: stewardship and limitation as correctives to ecological exploitation. Papuan traditions affirm that land belongs to God and must be preserved for future generations. Integrating biblical theology with Papuan wisdom enriches ecotheological discourse and guides the church as educator and ecological agent.

Contribution: This article contributes to the field of ecotheology by (1) offering a biblical exposition of Leviticus 25:23 as a theological foundation for ecological stewardship, (2) integrating Papuan local wisdom into Christian theological reflection, and (3) presenting the church as an agent of ecological praxis. The study aligns with the scope of *HTS Teologiese Studies* by providing contextual and interdisciplinary insights that connect biblical theology, ecology and local culture in addressing global ecological concerns.

Keywords: Leviticus 25:23; ecotheology; stewardship; Papuan local wisdom; church praxis.

Introduction

Nature and the environment, encompassing the sea, land, air, mountains, rivers, and the diversity of flora and fauna, constitute an essential unity within the ecological system of the universe. The relationship between humanity and nature is not one that can be severed but rather a mutual interconnection that sustains the continuity of life (Delahoya 2025). In general, ecological issues are closely related to the problem of climate change, which is currently manifested in the phenomenon of global warming. Human beings bear responsibility before God to care for and manage nature and all of creation. This responsibility is not merely a duty to God but also an existential imperative for humanity across all generations (Katu 2020). In recent years, environmental concerns have become a major global focus and are expected to increase in the coming decades (Weiskopf et al. 2020). God's command to Adam and Eve to 'fill the earth and subdue it' was never intended to sanction the exploitation of natural resources. As stated in Genesis 1:28, 31 and 2:15, one of God's purposes in creating humanity was to inhabit, exercise dominion over and preserve the universe as a sustainable dwelling place (Pangihutan & Jura 2022). Thus, this divine mandate underscores an ecological responsibility that cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, modern humanity often encounters nature almost without conscience. Nature is exploited and polluted indiscriminately, without guilt, hesitation or reverence (Tomusu 2021). Data from the Central Statistics Agency indicate that the rate of deforestation in Indonesia reached 480 000 ha per year in 2016–2017, decreasing slightly to 430 000 ha per year between 2017 and 2018. However, Indonesia still lost approximately 1.4 million ha of forest, or about 7%, during the period of 2005–2015, according to Green Growth Policy Review data reported by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2019 (Pardede 2024). More recent assessments, however, show that although the rate of deforestation has declined, the deforestation has not ceased entirely. The Ministry of Environment and Forestry recorded a net forest loss of 104 000 ha in 2021–2022, which represents one of the lowest deforestation figures in recent decades (Ministry of Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia 2023). However, Global Forest Watch reported that Indonesia continued

to lose approximately 260 000 ha of natural forest cover in 2024 (Global Forest Watch 2025). The destruction of forests has reduced clean water availability and soil fertility. Moreover, illegal logging has triggered uncontrolled droughts in various regions of the world and contributed to numerous ecological disasters such as flash floods, landslides and erosion, all stemming from deforestation without adequate rehabilitation efforts (Purwanto 2021).

As humanity enters the 21st century, environmental issues have assumed a central position and are projected to intensify in the years ahead. Global warming, the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion, environmental degradation, nuclear pollution, shrinking green spaces and the extinction of various plant and animal species are among the major ecological phenomena of our time (Newbold et al. 2015; Pfenning-Butterworth et al. 2024). These realities require theological examination because the ecological crisis involves fundamental moral, spiritual and anthropological questions that science alone cannot resolve. While scientific disciplines analyse environmental degradation, theology addresses the deeper issues of human motivation, ethical responsibility and humanity's relationship with creation. Hence, the dialogue between theology and ecology has gained increasing attention across religious traditions (Pangihutan & Jura 2022).

The ecological crisis demands a theological response that is both concrete and practical. The church, as a community of faith and an influential social institution, holds a strategic role in cultivating ecological awareness among its members. The church is not only a place of spiritual instruction but also a moral agent capable of internalising ecological responsibility within the life of the congregation and extending this responsibility into the wider public sphere. Through faith education, preaching and collective action, the church is called to foster an ecological spirituality orientated towards justice and sustainability within its communities (Cahyono 2021; Sihotang, Affandi & Rantetampang 2023). Within the Indonesian context, Papua represents a region of immeasurable ecological wealth and a distinctive system of customary land management. *Hak Ulayat*, as a form of communal land tenure by clans or tribes, is not only a legal institution but also one imbued with cosmological and spiritual significance (Cetera & Utama 2022; Ma'ruf et al. 2024). Land is understood as an ancestral inheritance that must be safeguarded and handed down in perpetuity to future generations; consequently, the permanent sale of the land to outsiders is generally prohibited (Ayu et al. 2024; Dewi & Junowo 2025).

In this regard, Leviticus 25:23 provides a consistent theological foundation, affirming that land ownership is not an absolute human right but belongs to God, who entrusts the land to humanity for responsible management. This perspective resonates with Papuan customary land practices, which regard land as a divine gift to be preserved for future generations. The integration of biblical theology with local wisdom thus opens the space for constructing an ecotheology that is more contextual, relevant and praxis-orientated.

Accordingly, an ecotheological reflection grounded in Leviticus 25:23 is developed by interpreting the principle of God's ownership of land in dialogue with Papuan local wisdom. This approach contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable land management, enriches contextual theology and offers a practical framework for the church in responding to contemporary ecological challenges.

Research methods and design

The method employed in this study is a qualitative-theological approach that combines biblical hermeneutics, a review of ecotheological literature and contextual analysis of Papuan culture. The biblical text of Leviticus 25:23 is examined through exegetical and hermeneutical approaches. The study engages both international and national academic literature on ecotheology, biblical interpretation and Papuan local wisdom such as *Ondofolo* [traditional leadership], *Hak Ulayat* [customary communal land rights] and the *noken* [a traditional woven bag with spiritual and cultural significance]. The analysis is carried out within a contextual hermeneutical framework that connects Scripture, the Christian theological tradition and local praxis to formulate a theological reflection on land as God's possession and its implications for contemporary ecological crises.

The emergence and foundations of ecotheology

Environmental degradation as a consequence of development, particularly Western industrialisation, has generated widespread criticism, for instance, regarding the negative role of Christian theology and even Christian scriptures in contributing to ecological destruction. The first and most influential critique came from Lynn White Jr, a U.S. cultural historian. In his seminal article 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', White argued that Christianity bears a significant burden of responsibility as a root cause of the contemporary ecological crisis (White 1967). Similarly, landscape architect McHarg (1964), criticised that while Christianity and Judaism have long been concerned with issues of justice and compassion, such concerns have largely been restricted to human-to-human relations. Nature, in this view, was regarded merely as the backdrop for human existence (Borrong 2019; Pangihutan & Jura 2022). However, ecological issues transcend specific regions or local contexts, posing a global crisis. As such, the ecological issues being raised today have awakened a broader awareness of humanity's responsibility to care for the environment (Katu 2020).

Ecotheology is a scientific discipline that examines the relationship between nature and theology, producing discourses aimed at promoting the well-being of both the environment and human life. Etymologically, the term *ecotheology* is composed of two words: ecology and theology. The word *ecology*, derived from the Greek language, originates from two terms: *oikos* [dwelling or household] and *logos* [thought or discourse] (Aditama, Muthohirin & Rafliyanto 2023). According to Conradie (2023), the

abbreviation *ecothology*, rather than 'ecological theology', is rooted in the recognition that the English words *ecology*, *economy* and *ecumenical* share the same Greek etymological root in *oikos*. Similarly, Ibe and Anthony (2023) explain that *ecothology*, as a combination of ecology and theology, may be defined as 'theological exploration of the relationship between religion and the environment, particularly with regard to environmental issues'. In this sense, *ecothology* represents a form of constructive theology that focuses on the reciprocal relationship between religion and nature, especially in light of contemporary ecological problems.

Ecology is the study of the relationship between religion and the environment, with the aim of exploring religious values that support ecological sustainability. In this regard, sacred texts play a fundamental role in shaping human understanding of nature, the environment and ecological responsibility (Rusmiati et al. 2023). According to Yopo and Mbelanggedo (2025), *ecothology* is a branch of theology that reflects upon the relationship between faith and ecological responsibility. Within Christian doctrine, *ecothology* occupies an important place in the witness of Scripture, for the earth and all that is in it serve as a sign of the covenant between God and humanity (Telaumbanua 2020). From a Christian perspective, *ecothology* can be understood as a theological discipline that addresses human attitudes and moral responsibility towards other creatures in the environment, reflecting truth, goodness, love and justice in accordance with the attributes of God revealed in Scripture (Tomusu 2021). God's love is expressed through creation, which has been entrusted to humanity. In Genesis 1, God's initial creative work culminates in humanity as the final creature, placed in the world to care for and preserve the earth (Aditama et al. 2023). Thus, in the Christian context, *ecothology* is rooted in the conviction that the earth and all that it contains are God's divine creation and must be safeguarded with full responsibility (Yopo & Mbelanggedo 2025). *Ecology*, therefore, calls believers in Christ to cultivate care and responsibility towards the environment by offering a faithful response and concrete actions to address the ecological crisis (Borrong 2019; Sihotang et al. 2023). This theological orientation invites the church not only to articulate ecological ethics but also to ground them biblically. In this regard, one of the foundational scriptural affirmations concerning land, ownership and human responsibility is found in Leviticus 25:23, providing a significant basis for developing a Christian ecological ethic.

Exegetical exposition of Leviticus 25:23

The concept of environmental stewardship originates in the creation narratives, in which God grants humanity dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and the animals of the land (cf. Gn 1:28), as well as the mandate in Genesis 2:15 to 'till and keep' the ground. These biblical texts present God as the Creator and ultimate owner of the universe, who in His goodness has granted human beings the privilege of utilising what he has created for their well-being. Nevertheless, these texts also affirm that every individual

holds a vital role as a steward within the dominion of God (Ibe & Anthony 2023). Scripture clearly emphasises humanity's task and responsibility to preserve and care for the land. Leviticus 25:2–4 speaks of the principle of the Sabbath for the land:

Speak to the children of Israel, and tell them, 'When you come into the land which I give you, then the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord. You shall sow your field six years, and you shall prune your vineyard six years, and gather in its fruits; but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard.' (Lv 25:2–4 New King James Version)

Maggang (2019) and Pangihutan and Jura (2022) emphasise that the command in Leviticus 25:2–4 reflects Israel's acknowledgement of God's ownership of the land and humanity's responsibility to safeguard creation. This principle is not merely an agricultural ethic but also an ecological theology, strongly emphasising the mandate to care for and steward the environment. Christian tradition, therefore, does not neglect creation; rather, it situates ecological responsibility within the framework of humanity's covenantal relationship with God (Borrong 2019).

Leviticus 25:23 underscores a theology of ownership, 'The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and live as foreigners with me'. From a hermeneutical perspective, this text introduces two essential ethical dimensions: the ethos of stewardship and the ethos of limitation. The ethos of stewardship reminds humanity that its mandate is always situated within a relational framework with God, while the ethos of limitation restrains the human tendency towards unlimited exploitation of the land. A lexical analysis of the phrase 'sold in perpetuity' [Hebrew: *limker latsmitut*] reveals a prohibition against permanent transfer that would sever the land from the family line to whom it had been allotted by God. The term *mine* [Hebrew: *li*] further emphasises that the ultimate authority over the land rests with God alone. Israel's designation as strangers [*gerim*] and foreigners [*toshavim*] reflects a theological relationship in which the people are merely stewards of the land entrusted to them, not absolute owners. The sale of land was to remain temporary, for in the Year of Jubilee, the land was to be restored to its original owner. This mechanism prevented monopoly, protected the poor and ensured ecological sustainability. Moreover, the Jubilee principle carried ecological and sustainability values: the command for the land to rest during the Sabbath year signified an awareness of ecological limits and humanity's dependence upon the rhythms of creation (Purwanto 2025; Watts 2022). This verse demonstrates that ownership from a biblical perspective is not absolute but rather an expression of divine stewardship, whereby humanity is granted authority to manage resources with moral responsibility towards others and society (Purwanto 2025). Leviticus 25 emphasises that the land ultimately belongs to God and therefore cannot be sold in perpetuity (Lv 25:23). This injunction establishes a theological foundation in which Israel is positioned not as the absolute owner of the land but as a tenant who holds the

land in trust under God's sovereignty. Budiman and Objantoro (2021) note that this prohibition serves as a continual reminder that the land is a divine possession, entrusted to Israel for responsible use rather than unrestricted exploitation. In this perspective, the central concern is not primarily agricultural regulation but the affirmation of God's ownership, which shapes Israel's ethical relationship with the land. This theological principle remains relevant today, offering a basis for ecological responsibility rooted in the recognition that the earth is a sacred trust rather than human property (Purwanto 2025).

Theology and ecology share a profound relationship. To neglect creation is to damage God's work, which amounts to disobedience against His command to preserve the earth. God has entrusted humanity with the responsibility to care for creation, which means that human beings are God's co-workers in managing, protecting and cultivating the universe (Tomusu 2021). Within Christianity, God is positioned as the ethical centre of creation's protection, so that divine values provide the ethical foundation for humanity's attitude towards the environment (Aditama et al. 2023; Katu 2020). In the present context, theology in relation to ecology must encompass all authentic theological approaches – from biblical theology to practical theology – that can genuinely contribute to the transformation of human life, particularly from a Christian perspective (Borrong 2019). The contextualisation of theology in the ecological domain represents a way of responding to contemporary issues and the empirical realities of environmental degradation. Ecotheological studies also provide theological reflections on diverse ecological crises and the way they may be addressed, as ecotheology is rooted in exploring the relationship between God, humanity and nature (Maggang 2019). Thus, theology in the context of environmental destruction must be understood as an effort to reflect theologically on the factual condition of ecological crisis (Aditama et al. 2023). The hermeneutics of Leviticus 25:23 demonstrates that an environmental crisis arises when humanity forgets the fundamental principle that the land does not belong to them absolutely but to God, who entrusts the land to humanity for stewardship. This divine mandate to 'work and keep' the earth provides a twofold responsibility: first, to cooperate with creation in producing sustenance; and second, to preserve the world by maintaining ecological balance. This balance is not merely for protecting creation but also for ensuring its ongoing sustainability (Ibe & Anthony 2023). Historically, theology has often become trapped in abstract discourse about God and truth, which has led to unproductive debates (Aditama et al. 2023). Leviticus 25:23, however, calls for a practical theology that is grounded in reality, in which humanity, God and the land exist in an inseparable relationship. Ecotheology thus emerges as a response to the increasingly urgent environmental problems of our time (Halawa & Situmorang 2024), insisting that theological reflection must be embodied in ecological praxis. In this way, Christian theology in the context of ecological crisis is no longer merely apologetic but is expressed in concrete praxis that engages creation with a solution-orientated orientation (Borrong 2019).

Ecotheology in Papuan local wisdom and customary land ownership

Doing theology in the context of ecological crisis requires engaging not only biblical texts but also the cultural and spiritual resources that shape a community's relationship with the land. In Papua, local wisdom expressed through architectural forms, carving, weaving, ritual practices and communal narratives embodies a worldview in which land is regarded as a sacred trust rather than a commodity (Cetera & Utama 2022; Ma'ruf et al. 2024). Within this cosmology, land belongs to the ancestors and ultimately to God, while human beings function as custodians who safeguard the land for future generations. This understanding resonates strongly with the theological principle in Leviticus 25:23, which affirms that land cannot be possessed absolutely because it belongs to God. In the Papuan context, the customary system of *Hak Ulayat* reflects this theological insight, positioning clans and tribes as communal stewards responsible for preserving the land's fertility, integrity and continuity. Such parallels demonstrate that Papuan local wisdom offers a rich cultural foundation for developing a contextual ecotheology that affirms God's ownership of the land while promoting sustainable and communal land management (Cetera & Utama 2022). Therefore, any ecotheological reflection in the Papuan context must take seriously the cultural knowledge, customary norms and ancestral practices through which communities understand, regulate and sustain their relationship with the land. These local wisdom traditions not only preserve ecological balance but also embody a theological consciousness that recognises land as a sacred inheritance entrusted across generations. Local wisdom functions not only as a guideline for daily interaction with nature but also as a social mechanism to ensure environmental sustainability for future generations (Zalukhu 2025). A study by Risamasu (2025), for instance, shows how the Akit culture in the Riau Archipelago preserves ecological balance through practices such as *ambek secukupnye* [taking only what is sufficient], *Betabek* [rituals of respect for nature] and *Bele* [village protection rituals]. These practices illustrate a harmonious relationship between humanity, nature and the Creator (Risamasu 2025).

In Papua, one of the enduring forms of local wisdom is the institution of the *Ondofolo* – the traditional chief or highest customary leader among the Sentani people. The *Ondofolo* plays a vital role in nurturing the religious life of the community by embodying fundamental qualities of leadership, peace, love and brotherhood found in Scripture. Living with integrity, wisdom and discernment, while guiding and caring for the community with daily attention grounded in devotion to the Creator, characterises the values of *Ondofolo* leadership (Warwer 2024; Warwer & Pontoan 2023). These values resonate with the Christian understanding of humanity as God's partners in caring for the earth and all creation. In Christian thought, human beings are called to be guardians of the earth, recognising creation as God's gift to be honoured and protected (Siwy & Hutagalung 2024; Utomo 2020).

Another significant expression of Papuan ecological wisdom is the practice of *Hak Ulayat*, in which land is understood as mother, the source of life and the basis of social relations. Within this system, customary law grants priority rights to family members or clan members before land can be transferred or sold. This reflects a traditional ecological awareness that land must not be dominated without limits by external powers. *Hak Ulayat* is regarded as ancestral heritage that must be preserved; to exploit it without respect for customary values is to desecrate a sacred trust. From an ecotheological perspective, *Hak Ulayat* can be interpreted as a form of stewardship rooted in spiritual values (Cetera & Utama 2022). The *Ondofolo*, as a customary leader, also exercises authority in regulating and supervising the use of land, water, forests and natural resources, ensuring that any use of the land by outsiders or institutions occurs within the framework of customary law. This authority is binding both socially and religiously, as the community believes that the land ultimately belongs to God, and human beings are mandated only to guard and manage the land (Warwer 2024). In this sense, the *Ondofolo* is not merely a political leader but also a guardian of the sacredness of *Hak Ulayat*, understood as both ancestral inheritance and divine gift. Land is not treated merely as an economic commodity but as a communal living space that must be preserved for future generations. The *Ondofolo's* role as mediator in land disputes, regulator of resource use and bridge between indigenous communities and external stakeholders exemplifies a model of ecological leadership rooted in spiritual values. This perspective resonates with the ecotheological conviction that creation belongs to God and humanity is entrusted only with stewardship, as expressed in Leviticus 25:23. Thus, the leadership of the *Ondofolo* may be considered a reflection of the divine mandate to care for the earth, in which the preservation of customary land represents not only a socio-cultural obligation but also an act of spiritual obedience.

Beyond the institution of *Ondofolo*, Papuan local wisdom is also reflected in cultural symbols that hold profound religious and spiritual meaning. One such symbol is the *noken*, a traditional handwoven bag recognised as embodying divine love and local identity. The ecological significance of the *noken* is evident in both its materials and its moral values. It is crafted from natural fibres such as orchid bark, tree roots and forest leaves that are harvested through sustainable practices that do not damage the environment. The process of making a *noken* teaches principles of patience, moderation and respect for the forest. These principles guide communities to take only what nature is able to regenerate. In this sense, the *noken* functions not only as a vessel of life and communal identity but also as a cultural reminder of sustainable living and responsible interaction with the natural world (Kayame 2023; Pikei & Sihombing 2023). Both the *Ondofolo* as a customary leader and the *noken* as a cultural symbol offer a local ecotheological paradigm that emphasises harmony between humanity, nature and God. This paradigm demonstrates that Papuan local wisdom is not merely a set of inherited traditions but also a theological–ecological foundation relevant for cultivating contemporary ecological

awareness and enriching the broader discourse of Christian ecotheology.

Church and land stewardship

The role of the church in preserving the environment must be understood in light of the theological principle in Leviticus 25:23, which teaches that land ultimately belongs to God and is entrusted to human beings as tenants responsible for its care. This theological vision aligns closely with Papuan ecological wisdom, particularly the customary system of *Hak Ulayat*, in which land is recognised as a sacred gift from God passed down through the ancestors and preserved for future generations. Therefore, any ecological engagement of the church must draw from both Scripture and local wisdom, enabling the church to articulate a contextual ecological theology rooted in divine ownership of the land and grounded in Papua's communal stewardship ethos. In the Papuan context, the church's ecological role cannot be separated from the cultural structures that have long governed the relationship between people, land and the sacred. As (Warwer 2024) demonstrates, the institution of the *Ondofolo* in Sentani society provides a model of moral authority that safeguards communal harmony, regulates access to land and ensures the continuity of customary norms. This indigenous leadership structure embodies a worldview in which land is understood as a sacred trust received from God and transmitted through the ancestors – an understanding that resonates with the theological affirmation in Leviticus 25:23 that the land ultimately belongs to God. The church, therefore, has an important opportunity to work collaboratively with customary leaders in promoting ecological stewardship rooted in both Scripture and Papuan local wisdom. By affirming the theological principle of divine land ownership and recognising the legitimacy of *Hak Ulayat* as a communal stewardship system, the church can help translate biblical insights into culturally grounded ecological practices. Such cooperation strengthens the church's prophetic role in advocating for the protection of forests, rivers and customary territories, while also reinforcing the values of harmony, responsibility and intergenerational care that are central to Papuan ecological wisdom.

The current ecological crisis is not only the responsibility of governments but also the responsibility of the church as an agent of God's mission of salvation. The ecological crisis is a matter of ethics that the church must proclaim from its pulpits in the pursuit of justice (Katu 2020). Christianity is often regarded as a source of positive values for the environment, and many voices within the Christian tradition envision the flourishing of the earth and all living creatures (Ibe & Anthony 2023). In order to cultivate a more environmentally conscious lifestyle, collaboration between the church and its congregations is crucial in instilling ecological spirituality and encouraging environmentally responsible ways of life (Pardede 2024). As a mediator of ecotheological education, the church plays an important role in educating its members on issues of ecology and the environment (Siwy & Hutagalung 2024). As a centre for

spirituality, the church disseminates religious teaching, provides moral guidance and supports humanitarian service. The church takes diverse forms and denominational expressions, reflecting the plurality of faith and religious practices worldwide (Fajar 2023; Siwy & Hutagalung 2024). In this context, the church is positioned as educator, role model, prophet and partner in preserving the environment. While church theology provides the moral and spiritual foundation, the church's concrete actions contribute practically to ecological sustainability. Thus, the mission of the church extends not only to the salvation of souls but also to the salvation of creation as an integral dimension of God's mission in the world (Stevanus 2019). The church's role in environmental preservation provides a framework for understanding how the church, as a religious community, translates its theological insights into tangible actions and concrete policies that support sustainable practices (Siwy & Hutagalung 2024). As part of the body of Christ in the world, the church bears the responsibility to serve as a prophetic voice on behalf of creation that suffers under oppression. The church cannot remain silent in the face of environmental exploitation carried out in the name of development or progress. Instead, it must act as an agent of reconciliation, advocating for ecological justice. This activity involves educational initiatives, influence on public policy and active participation in environmental preservation as an essential aspect of the church's mission (Yopo & Mbelangedo 2025).

Various Christian communities have embraced the 'Green Church' movement, implementing conservation initiatives such as energy-efficient buildings and waste management programmes. The Communion of Churches in Indonesia, for instance, has launched sustainability programmes promoting climate justice, tree-planting campaigns and environmentally friendly liturgical practices. Similarly, the Javanese Christian Church in Yogyakarta has integrated ecological themes into its preaching and encouraged its members to adopt green lifestyles. The *Laudato Si'* [praise be to you] movement in Indonesia, inspired by Pope Francis's encyclical on ecological justice, advocates for renewable energy transitions and ecological education in Catholic schools (Rusmiati et al. 2023). Christian doctrine underscores the importance of harmony between humanity and nature, affirming that the earth and all it contains serve as a covenantal sign between God and humanity (Telaumbanua 2020). This concept establishes God as the Creator and humanity as caretakers of His work. The freedom granted by God carries with it the responsibility to become God's co-workers in managing, protecting, preserving and developing creation (Tomusu 2021). Humanity, as the image-bearer of God, deeply influences the church's ecological stance. Theologically, human beings are regarded as God's unique creation, reflecting his image and perfection (Siwy & Hutagalung 2024; Widiatna 2020). The doctrine that humanity is the crown of creation has often been misused to justify the exploitation of nature. Yet the biblical testimony affirms that humanity is made in God's image (*imago Dei*) (Pardede 2024). The task of managing creation must not be reduced to meeting human needs and the well-being of other creatures

alone but should also be understood as an expression of devotion, gratitude and love towards God (Tomusu 2021). The congregation itself must be viewed as an agent of change in fostering sustainable practices and contributing to ecological preservation (Giawa 2021; Siwy & Hutagalung 2024). Christian education plays a key role in addressing environmental issues by teaching that ecological destruction results from irresponsible human activity (Pangihutan & Jura 2022). Within Christian education, cultivating the understanding that humanity bears responsibility for protecting creation is essential. This role is crucial because of the interconnectedness of humanity, the universe, and the Creator, requiring humanity to continuously care for and preserve creation for the creation's integrity and survival (Bonde 2020; Pangihutan & Jura 2022). Any form of environmental exploitation that damages creation is inconsistent with Christian doctrine (Aditama et al. 2023).

Christian education within the church should emphasise several key responsibilities in ecological stewardship. These include cultivating a natural, clean and healthy environment; cooperating with government and other stakeholders in environmental protection; and building networks that safeguard creation. The church is also called to collaborate across sectors to implement environmental initiatives, while engaging in practical actions such as managing waste responsibly, conserving water, planting trees, preventing illegal logging, promoting simple living and encouraging the responsible use of resources. In addition, churches are encouraged to develop environmentally oriented programmes, including clean-up campaigns, green-environment initiatives and recycling movements (Pangihutan & Jura 2022; Stevanus 2019). Ultimately, ecotheology urges believers to embody spiritual values in managing natural resources so as to maintain balance between human needs and ecological sustainability (Delahoya 2025; Halawa & Situmorang 2024). Cultivating ecological consciousness in both schools and churches fosters respect for nature as an expression of faith, for the destruction of creation undermines the very essence of humanity (Pangihutan & Jura 2022). Thus, ecotheology demands not only reflection but also concrete solutions that integrate faith, ethics and sustainable practices – especially as education and science alone are insufficient to bring about transformation amidst today's global ecological crisis (Ibe & Anthony 2023).

Conclusion

The ecological crisis that currently afflicts the world demands responses that are not only scientific but also theological. This article affirms that Christian theology, particularly through the exposition of Leviticus 25:23, provides a fundamental theological framework concerning land ownership: land does not belong absolutely to human beings but ultimately to God, who entrusts it to humanity for responsible stewardship. This perspective highlights two crucial ethical dimensions – stewardship and limitation – which together serve as a corrective to the exploitative tendencies that have driven the global ecological crisis. The integration of biblical texts with

Papuan local wisdom, particularly the practice of *Hak Ulayat* [customary communal land rights] and the traditional leadership of the *Ondofolo*, demonstrates a profound harmony between biblical traditions and local cultural understandings of land as a sacred gift. The view that land is a sacred gift from God, entrusted to the community through their ancestors, resonates with the biblical principle that God is the ultimate owner of the land. Consequently, a contextual theology that emerges from the dialogue between Scripture and Papuan local wisdom not only enriches global ecotheological discourse but also highlights the distinctive contribution of the Indonesian context.

Furthermore, this article emphasises the strategic role of the church as an agent of ecological praxis. The church is called to internalise ecological spirituality into faith education, liturgy, teaching and social action. The church functions not only as a teacher and preacher but also as a model and a prophetic voice advocating ecological justice in the midst of the exploitative practices that destroy creation. In this way, the church becomes God's partner in caring for the earth while serving as a social transformative agent in responding to environmental crises. Academically, this study offers three contributions: firstly, it provides an exposition of Leviticus 25:23 as a biblical foundation for ecotheology; secondly, it integrates Papuan local wisdom within the framework of Christian theology; and thirdly, it underscores the role of the church in ecological praxis. Together, these contributions demonstrate that Christian theology is capable of offering contextual responses to contemporary ecological challenges.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Fredrik Warwer: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

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