

## Domination or Stewardship? The Old Testament and Ecology Between Lynn White and Desmond Tutu

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### Abstract

*In a 1967 issue of Science, Lynn White claimed that “[e]specially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen... [and] 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.” White and many others have regarded such a subject-object relationship to nature as the teaching of the Old Testament itself, especially in its account of Adam being created in God’s image, ostensibly to bring nature into submission. This worldview of subjugating an unruly Other (both people and resources) would become the pseudo-biblical rationale for wars of conquest by Christendom’s empires. By contrast, Bishop Desmond Tutu is prominent among non-western thinkers who hold that the imago Dei in humanity stands opposed to every form of colonial domination of the Other. Tutu also extends his signature notion of Ubuntu (human interdependence) to include the entire created order within “Eco Ubuntu.” Since the Old Testament has thus featured in both (more) western narratives of unfettered domination over nature as well as (more) non-western narratives of creation stewardship, it is essential to adjudicate between these religio-cultural clashes in interpretation during the Anthropocene by revisiting the witness of the Bible’s creation texts. In showing that holism characterises the most recent creation theologies, this study will also examine recent uses of the Old Testament in the rather disparate arguments of advocates of subsistence economics, sceptics of global warming, and climate apocalypticists.*

**Keywords:** Old Testament; Hebrew Bible; Climate change; Creation care; Ecology; Dominion theology

### Introduction

Norman Gottwald has memorably stated that “only as the full materiality of ancient Israel is more securely grasped will we be able to make sense of its spirituality” (Gottwald 1999:xxv). The earthliness of the Old Testament has generally rendered it more fit for sowing contextual theologies of creation than the New. The modern harvest that comes from the OT can range from liberation theology’s “preferential option for the poor” to prosperity theology’s favour upon the rich, to name two conceptions of material blessing with roots in OT soil.

Besides these creation theologies which often feature in the developing world, the developed world has also entwined its views on materiality with the Old Testament in other ways. This has been particularly through the cultural convergence that the missionary-explorer David Livingstone famously deemed “Christianity, commerce, and civilisation.”<sup>1</sup> The colonialism of western empires found apparent support in the Old Testament, especially in regarding the *imago Dei* as a subject-object relationship between humanity and the natural order. The pseudo-biblical warrant for suppressing an unruly Other (both people and resources) which resulted is what led environmentalist Lynn White to make his influential claim: “Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen... [and] 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” (White, Jr. 1967:1205).

Intriguingly, non-western theologians offer a rebuttal to nominally Protestant imperialism from the pages of the same Old Testament. But they do so by insisting that the biblical text portrays humanity as stewards who exist within God’s creation rather than apart from it. Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa is among many in the Majority World who find the *imago Dei* in humanity to oppose every form of domination over the Other. In this regard, Tutu extends his signature notion of *Ubuntu*—a theology of human interdependence—to include all of creation within “Eco Ubuntu” and “planetary Ubuntu” (Tutu 2022:2).

Does the Old Testament’s perspective on ecology align more closely with the likes of Lynn White or Desmond Tutu? Since the OT is adduced as support for both (more) western narratives of domination over nature as well as (more) non-western narratives of stewarding creation, this study adjudicates these religio-cultural debates by revisiting the witness of the Bible’s creation texts. We will also have occasion to examine recent uses of the OT in the rather disparate arguments of theologians advocating subsistence economics, sceptics of global warming, and climate apocalypticists.

### **The Old Testament and creation theology in the west: two historical case studies**

Our first of two case studies on creation theology in the west will examine the historical relationship between imperialism and the New World. In medieval Europe, Catholic explorers from Portugal and Spain tended to see biblical Israel’s journeys among pagan nations mirrored in their own exploration of the Americas. Christopher Columbus, for example, used the prophecies of Isaiah to interpret his own travels as a turning point in God’s millennial plan to evangelise the natives, discover the wealth of foreign lands, and reclaim Jerusalem from its enemies (Davison 2019). This kind of *providentialism* in inscribing oneself upon salvation history received official sanction through a papal bull issued in 1493, following the return of Columbus’ first voyage to the Americas (Newman 2016:129–30).

Over a few decades, Spanish attitudes toward the New World shifted from the apocalyptic hope of Columbus to a this-worldly agenda for subjugating the natives and their resources. The pinnacle of such colonialism in the sixteenth century can be seen in Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, a Spanish humanist and priest who justified Christian

<sup>1</sup> For an African perspective on Livingstone and this controversial slogan, see Nkomazana 1998.

imperialism by demeaning Native Americans, seeing them as not very different from animals. In his “Treatise on the Just Causes of the War Against the Indians,” Sepúlveda asserted,

the Spaniards have a perfect right to rule over these barbarians of the New World and adjacent islands, who in prudence, intelligence, virtue, and humanity are as inferior to the Spaniards as children are to adults and women to men, having between them as great a difference as that between savage and cruel peoples and the most merciful peoples... and, I would even say, between monkeys and human beings.<sup>2</sup>

In short, Sepúlveda saw indigenous peoples as “barbarians” at best and “monkeys” at worst. This rhetorical strategy of animalising the Other served to uphold the Catholic position that the Americas were *terra nullius* (Lat. “empty land”) and divinely appointed for imperial Spain. The so-called “Doctrine of Discovery” (as it is now known) subsequently enabled Christendom’s legal fiction of “discovering” new lands by regarding their existing inhabitants as sub-humans, which meant that the land was “unoccupied”.

Elsewhere in Sepúlveda’s “Treatise,” a Eurocentric conception of Genesis 1 merged with an androcentric understanding of natural law. He also argued “that wild beasts be subdued and subjected to the dominion of humanity. Therefore the man rules over the woman, the adult over the child, the father over his sons and daughters, that is to say, the most powerful and perfect over those who are weakest and most imperfect.”<sup>3</sup> Within this medieval framework, the *imago Dei* was not limited to male Spaniards; it also justified domination of the Other as a theological imperative. The Spanish colonial ideology that vilified Native Americans would lay the groundwork for American proverbs of a later period such as “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” and “Kill the Indian, save the man.”<sup>4</sup> The demeaning of Native American men went along with the exoticisation of Native American women, a phenomenon later called “The Pocahontas Perplex” (Green 1993).

Following the Spanish colonialism of the sixteenth century, a wave of Puritan arrivals came from England a century later. The latter forged their theological identity through a different kind of appeal to the Old Testament. Besides regarding themselves as a “new Israel” on the way to the promised land (à la Joshua), English settlers tended to invoke the *imago Dei* with an emphasis on the land more than its people. The OT’s “creation mandate” (Gen. 1:26–28) was regarded by the English in specifically agrarian terms of cultivating the soil (Newman 2016:134–35). With reference to John Locke’s views on private property, this Puritan/English worldview offered ownership of the land to those who maximised its fertility, thereby excluding Native Americans due to their supposedly inferior farming techniques.

In British colonial America, then, the cultural accents on divine election and God’s gift of land reinforced one another through a selective use of the OT’s creational themes

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Richard 1996, 298.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Richard 1996, 299.

<sup>4</sup> For an extended treatment of the latter slogan which applies to the former, see Mieder 1993.

which had notable similarities to the “divine right of kingship” in Protestant England. The main difference between these interpretations of the “creation mandate” on opposite sides of the Atlantic lay in whether king-like authority over the created order belonged to an entire people or was instead concentrated in a single person. Common to both views, however, was the assumption of a subject-object relationship between humanity and nature that granted sovereignty to the former over the latter.<sup>5</sup>

Following the War of Independence, the new American nation tended to appropriate Old Testament themes by combining Spanish and British elements of colonialism as God’s providential design. The hybrid phenomenon of “Manifest Destiny” was the result. The “frontier spirit” of American westward expansion drew upon the Spanish practice of animalising Native Americans as a pagan Other that needed expulsion like the Canaanites, while resembling British agricultural themes in romanticising the “wild, wild west” as a savage Other to be tamed.<sup>6</sup> While Christianity in the west did not uniformly interpret the *imago Dei* in terms of domination toward creation,<sup>7</sup> the frequency of biblical argumentation to justify Christendom’s subjugation of both people and resources is hard to miss, lending credence to Lynn White’s assertion.

Our second historical case study explores biblical scholarship of the last 150 years as another realm that tends to equate one’s own culture with God-endowed progress. During the heyday of nominally Protestant imperialism, the (re)discovery of non-western lands also led to a reckoning among biblicists, theologians, and philosophers from the west. As texts from lost civilisations were unearthed and studied, a broad consensus emerged across disciplines that the Bible’s view of time was culturally distinctive in the ancient world as a linear narrative that was building toward a goal (whether of weal or woe). The view from biblical scholarship, conveniently enough, tended to mirror western civilisation’s self-understanding of teleology and lent support to the “othering” of non-western cultures as primitive for prioritising stasis over change. The phenomenon of “western normativity” (also known as the “hegemony postulate”) is unmistakable in the following comparisons between linear views of time from the west and cyclical views from the non-western world. The first is by a philosopher, the second by a theologian, while the third is by a historian:

The Judeo-Christian tradition takes time to be linear in its structure, in contrast to views of time as cyclic. Hence, eschatology becomes an important issue for that tradition. Cyclic views of time are dubiously intelligible if tense and temporal becoming are real, since once the cycle has run its course the cycle would seem to begin *a second time*, which presupposes linearity (Craig 2008:899).

The foundational charter of the philosophy of history is found in one verse: “God, at the beginning of time, created heaven and earth” (Gen. 1:1–2). This text, as traditionally interpreted, shattered the pagan conception of an eternal universe

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<sup>5</sup> On sovereignty as a common theme between advocates and opponents of ‘divine right’ thinking, see the classic work of Figgis 1914.

<sup>6</sup> The strategy of ‘mirror reading’ that equates Canaanites with Native Americans is well discussed by Warrior 1989. For a commentary on ‘Manifest Destiny’ alongside OT texts, see Hawk 2010.

<sup>7</sup> The Anabaptist movement and its descendants are a significant counterexample. On how domination and stewardship approaches to creation have always coexisted within the Christian tradition, see Harrison 1999.

parceled out in an infinity of cycles. ... The doctrine of creation entailing linear time opened a vast horizon of novel events that took history beyond the limits of the ancient chroniclers. Even Herodotus, the father of history... was nevertheless imprisoned in a circle (Herrera 2001:13).

The most important, or at least the most obvious characteristic of Western historical thought is its stress on development or progress, in other words its “linear” view of the past. ... These ideas are deeply embedded in the Jewish and the Christian traditions, where they were elaborated in terms of “fulfillment,” “consummation,” “messiah” and “millennium.” ... [M]odern concepts of historical development may be viewed as secular forms of these religious ideas (Burke 2002:17–18).

Here is not the place to debate whether the west’s view of time and history is uniformly linear or to challenge the accuracy of equating linearity with the west’s own historical consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Despite such problematisations of cause and effect, it is telling that the OT has still featured frequently in the western academy’s self-referential and oversimplified contrasts between linear history and cyclic creation that were mentioned above. For this reason, it often comes as a surprise to those in other disciplines that OT scholarship has long since denied the cultural uniqueness of “biblical teleological time.”<sup>9</sup> It was once common for OT scholars to hold that creational motifs belonged to the realm of mythic chaos which had been subordinated to the OT’s storyline of linear progress and the inbreaking of *Heilsgeschichte* (Germ. “salvation history”). This quasi-evolutionary view on the OT’s demythologisation of “pagan” elements peaked in the 1960s through the work of G. Ernest Wright and Gerhard von Rad,<sup>10</sup> among many others. That is to say, OT scholarship itself was once complicit in (more) western interpretations of the OT that eventuated in “the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen,” to quote Lynn White’s arresting description.

Already for half a century, though, OT scholars in the west have denied the bifurcation between linear history and cyclic creation which tends to malign the latter as “myth.”<sup>11</sup> The postmodern turn toward the interpreter has also led to epiphanies such as what Rolf Rendtorff, a leading OT scholar, wryly acknowledged about his discipline: “The Hebrew Bible begins with creation. Old Testament Theologies usually do not. How is that? The answer is obvious: because of the theology of the respective authors of Old Testament Theologies” (Rendtorff 1992:204). In fact, OT scholarship of western origin has experienced such a sharp inversion that creation is now commonly regarded as the seedbed for the entirety of Israelite faith and practice (Schmid 1984:108), including the theological themes of salvation history that were once held to typify both the Bible and western civilisation.

<sup>8</sup> On these reductionistic categories, see the essays in Rösen 2002.

<sup>9</sup> As termed and dismissed by Brettler 2004.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*, Studies in Biblical Theology 2 (London: SCM Press, 1950), 20–29; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 2:140–41.

<sup>11</sup> The seminal work that effected this change almost single-handedly was Albrektson 1967.

## **The Old Testament and non-western theologies of creation**

On a parallel note, the non-western world has been rooted to a comparatively greater degree in the soil of the Old Testament. Bishop Tutu, as already hinted, extends the African communal notion of Ubuntu to enclose all creatures within “Eco Ubuntu,” including those often regarded as non-living:

[W]e are linked to all living beings by flows of matter and energy, how we breathe the same air, drink the same water. Shouldn't we extend Ubuntu beyond people to all other living beings? Ubuntu arose as relatively small groups of people cooperated to survive in a challenging environment. ... If Ubuntu encourages us to cultivate and care for ourselves, for our families and our brethren, so too should we care for our larger, extended body—the veld, bush, soil, air, water, and the wetlands. We need to widen the circle of our Ubuntu as we become aware of the totality of what we are. Our bodies extend into the soil, into the air, into the rivers and oceans (Tutu 2022).

In another publication, Tutu expounds similarly on the relevance of “planetary Ubuntu” for this moment in which humanity’s obsession with controlling nature has backfired and ironically become the greatest threat to humanity’s existence:

In this time, when technology and growing human numbers have changed the face of the Earth, humans no longer have to fight nature. Nature has been defeated, and succumbed. We are in the midst of the sixth great extinction event, caused by humans, with other species disappearing 100,000 times faster than the natural background extinction rate. We also face planetary crises of climate change, water availability, and pollution...

Let us practice planetary Ubuntu, widen and deepen the circle, act with love to all that we are, to our entire community, to our extended planetary being.

I am because you are

We are because the planet is (Tutu n.d.).

Tutu’s exhortation that “I am because you are/We are because the planet is” plays upon his famous summation of Ubuntu as “the essence of being human. It speaks of how my humanity is bound up inextricably with yours. ... I can only be me if you are fully you. I am because we are” (Tutu 2011:22).

It is striking that Tutu’s expositions of “Eco Ubuntu” and “planetary Ubuntu” have incorporated the non-human creation in a manner that contrasts with Tutu’s earlier understanding of Ubuntu as “what ultimately distinguished people from animals” (Tutu 2011:22). This shift on Tutu’s part illustrates how African cosmologies can hold communalism and anthropocentrism in tension without collapsing them. For as John Mbiti (1991:35–40) observes, the prevalence of the circle as a ritual symbol in Africa places humanity at the centre of creation while maintaining continuity between them. This differs markedly from the anthropocentrism of western cosmologies that situate humanity above or outside creation rather than within it (Simkins 1994:92–94).

Much like “Eco Ubuntu” and “Planetary Ubuntu” in Africa,<sup>12</sup> creation theology in Oceania has also flourished due to “traditional natural-cultural worldviews and practices, which include notions of interconnectedness, belonging, sharing and reciprocity, respect, and the sacredness of the land-sea-air domain” (Rubow and Bird 2016:153). Subsistence-based societies such as those in Africa and Oceania hold that sustainability is a feature of creation itself, rather than a recent manmade intervention which climate change has made necessary.<sup>13</sup>

Especially influential in this regard has been Sione ‘Amanaki Havea, a Tongan theologian. His notion of “coconut theology”<sup>14</sup> highlights the interconnectedness of all creation, much like the coconut represents the tie that binds people with every other creature in Oceania. Accordingly, doing ecotheology in Oceania (and beyond) involves synchronising oneself with “coconut time” through the practice of “*waiting*, in the sense of people living within the fecundity and powers of nature” (Rubow and Bird 2016:153–54). In the rest of the world, the failure to observe Havea’s notion of “coconut time” (Havea 1987:14) has resulted in rising sea levels that threaten the survival of numerous island nations in Oceania, such as Kiribati and Tuvalu.

### **The Old Testament and newer western theologies of creation**

“Eco Ubuntu,” “planetary Ubuntu,” and “coconut time” are creation theologies from the Majority World which resonate closely with the Old Testament. Belatedly along similar lines, western theologians are re-examining how the OT portrays the cosmos with various God-given synergies between humanity and the rest of creation. Scholars have outlined how human disobedience leads to creational suffering (Isa. 24:1–6; Jer. 4:11–26) and human repentance to creational flourishing (Ezek. 36:33–38; Hos. 14:1–7), as well as vice versa, among the themes most prominent in OT prophetic literature.<sup>15</sup> What is more, it has become apparent that God’s mighty acts of salvation and judgment (e.g., Isa. 40–55; Hos. 2) occur with creation as their primary scope rather than being strictly anthropocentric or historical in nature.<sup>16</sup> And as mentioned earlier, the legal conception of justice also utilises creation as a constant backdrop rather than being a disparate tradition, thereby problematising the older dichotomy between legal and cultic ideas that was popularised by Julius Wellhausen.

In fact, a growing number of western scholars view the dynamic relationships between creation and Creator in terms that were once dismissed as “eastern” or “pantheistic.” The emerging consensus is captured in this statement by Terence Fretheim:

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<sup>12</sup> Though Desmond Tutu has been the public face of Ubuntu in Africa (along with Nelson Mandela), the more influential scholar in formulating ‘Ubuntu theology’ as an indigenous African construct has actually been the Kenyan scholar John Mbiti (1931–2019). For a summary and evaluation of Mbiti’s legacy from an African perspective, see Gathogo 2022. Even as the communal notion of Ubuntu (as formulated by Mbiti and others) has been highly influential in African culture and theology, the incorrectness of overemphasising communal dynamics at the expense of individual agency in African contexts is well noted by Gyeke 1997:35–76.

<sup>13</sup> On these Oceanic themes in a Tongan context, see Vaka’uta 2015. This is not to say that the natural world order lacks inequality or violence, only that scarcity is not a feature of Oceania’s self-understanding of creation.

<sup>14</sup> On Havea’s legacy, see Tomlinson 2020:66–87.

<sup>15</sup> This sea of change is evident in the career of Walter Brueggemann, one of the foremost OT theologians of the last fifty years. His journey in rethinking creation theology is summarised in Brueggemann 1996; *ibid.*, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Representative details from Hosea are discussed in Hwang 2021:31–37.

“Creation is a seamless web. If this is the case among the creatures, then it is more so between the Creator and creatures; for the oneness of creation and the oneness of the Creator are inextricably connected, or polytheism is very near at hand” (Fretheim 2005:251).

In addition, the rehabilitation of creation from inanimate “It” to living “Thou” has found other parallels in Old Testament scholarship. The notion of “limited good” in creation has received special attention in OT economics of western derivation. Ronald Simkins, for instance, finds Christians’ support for capitalism to be biblically problematic since creation is typically regarded as a bottomless well of resources and energy which supports production without limits and consequences (Simkins 2020). Simkins affirms the OT’s witness on the goodness and abundance of creation, but with the caveat that fruitfulness is conceived within an agricultural and local scope that lands closer to subsistence economics than the exponential levels of production and consumption which characterise the globalised fossil-fuel economy.

Such a view that scarcity is good and essential in the life of faith, as exemplified in ancient Israel’s experience of the land (Burge 2009:25–35), contrasts notably with the common associations among Christianity, liberal democratic capitalism, and modernisation.<sup>17</sup> It is thus significant when western OT scholars problematise the oft-unexamined theological connections between piety and prosperity by demonstrating how the OT paints material wealth in a rather ambiguous light (McConville 2000). Their warnings against objectifying the material realm also mount a challenge to both the liberation and prosperity theologies of the Majority World for showing how each tends toward a depersonalised view of creation which presumes the dominion of humans, whether strong or weak.

Another development in western scholarship has been the recognition that the “creation mandate” of Genesis 1 is unintelligible apart from the priestly imagery of Genesis 2. In the Hebrew language, God’s directive for humanity to “till and keep” the earth (Gen. 2:15) echoes the command for Levites to “serve and keep” the ark of the covenant (Num. 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6), which mediates the divine presence (Block 2010:129–30; Provan 2014:225–26). The requirement for sacred space to be maintained by holy vessels rules out God’s approval for human conduct that centres on oneself at the expense of the Other, as in Christendom’s frequent understanding of the “creation mandate.” As Ellen Davis rightly observes, “Adam comes to Eden as a protector, answerable for the well-being of the precious thing that he did not make; he is to be an observer, mindful of limits that are built into the created order as both inescapable and fitting” (Davis 2009:31). Not only this, God himself is a gardener of creation who invites the righteous to join the others-centred work of making creation fruitful in his way and timing (Bahnsen and Wirzba 2012:15–18). Lynn White’s charge of anthropocentrism may have been true for OT scholarship of a previous generation, but it does not accurately describe the holism of materiality and spirituality (à la Norman Gottwald) which characterises more recent work on the Old Testament.

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<sup>17</sup> As influentially proposed by Weber 2003.

### **Notable exceptions to holistic creation theologies**

Even as creation theologies of the Old Testament trend toward the holism advocated by Bishop Tutu and others, there remain some outliers that support the accusation of dualism levelled by Lynn White. Climate-change denialism and climate apocalypticism are among the most prominent examples. They can even become interrelated, though these two positions might seem to have little in common. On the one hand, climate-change deniers oppose the scientific consensus on rising global temperatures, sometimes with assistance from the theological argument that God would never allow his creation to be destroyed (or to destroy itself). On the other hand, climate apocalypticists not only hold that global warming is occurring, but they also understand it as a theological necessity since turmoil in nature is thought to fulfil biblical prophecy. While world-affirming and world-rejecting postures initially appear to be opposites (Weber 1963:163–65), Christian forms of denialism and apocalypticism about climate change share a surprising number of assumptions about creation in the OT which require closer examination.

Climate-change denialism takes numerous forms, necessitating a focus on specifically Christian expressions of this phenomenon for reasons of scope. The contentious and often piecemeal character of current debates makes it pertinent to draw on the most systematic and articulate exposition of climate-change denial as offered by the Cornwall Alliance, a consortium of Christian scholars which was started in 2005 by Calvin Beisner, formerly a theology professor at Covenant College and Knox Theological Seminary. The organisation's foundational document in *The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship* (dating from around the year 2000) indicates that ecological stewardship is their foremost concern, yet in a manner that diverges from the academic consensus on climate change.

The Cornwall Alliance's *Declaration* contains seven Judeo-Christian theological affirmations, of which the most relevant for our purposes are the last two:

6. God in his mercy has not abandoned sinful people or the created order but has acted throughout history to restore men and women to fellowship with Him and through their stewardship to enhance the beauty and fertility of the earth.
7. Human beings are called to be fruitful, to bring forth good things from the earth, to join with God in making provision for our temporal well being, and to enhance the beauty and fruitfulness of the rest of the earth. Our call to fruitfulness, therefore, is not contrary to but mutually complementary with our call to steward God's gifts. This call implies a serious commitment to fostering the intellectual, moral, and religious habits and practices needed for free economies and genuine care for the environment (*The Cornwall Declaration On Environmental Stewardship*, n.d.).

Much within these two affirmations by western theologians would not be objectionable to Old Testament specialists, Christian climate scientists, and non-western theologians (to name three groups with holistic inclinations). But upon further inspection, it is revealing that stewardship is defined as the responsibility "to enhance the beauty and fertility of the earth" (#6) and "to enhance the beauty and fruitfulness of the rest of the earth" (#7). Placed alongside the statement that 'God in his mercy has not abandoned sinful people or the created order' (#6), the *Declaration* downplays the witness of both

the OT and modern science that human actions have always posed the greatest threat to the created order.

Divine abandonment of a sinful people and the land they occupy is actually a central theme in the OT (contra the *Declaration*), and restoration from God for all creation will not occur before humanity undergoes a consummate change of heart and accounting for sins (Block 2000). Such neglect of the OT textual data makes it difficult to take the *Declaration* seriously as a work claiming biblical authority, which it purports to uphold: “We aspire to a world in which objective moral principles—not personal prejudices—guide moral action” (under a section called “Our Aspirations”).

Within the *Declaration*, then, the ostensive need for humanity to “enhance” the creation is a potentially disingenuous move to ignore the numerous OT passages mentioned above that describe the earth as both a relational agent that mourns its defilement by humanity as well as God’s dynamic vessel to judge human sins and bring about human repentance. On this note, the statement of the *Declaration* that God “has acted throughout history to restore men and women to fellowship with Him” (#6) seems to highlight divine sovereignty at the expense of human responsibility. The underlying assumption, whether intended or not, is apparently a dualistic understanding of “fellowship” in primarily vertical, individual, abstract, spiritual, and interiorised terms which lump God and humanity together, apart from creation. It was in response to such disembodied and hierarchical theologies of creation that Gottwald made his important observation about the symbiosis of materiality and spirituality in the Old Testament’s worldview.

In short, the *Declaration* fails to grasp the OT’s motif that creation lacks God-given “beauty” (cf. ##6–7) due only to human sinfulness rather than any deficit on either God’s part or creation’s part. It similarly omits how flourishing and fellowship with God were already characteristic of creation before the Fall (Gen. 2:5–7, 10–14) as well as being the default state of creation whenever anthropocentrism recedes from view (Job 38–39; Ps. 104). This is not to say that the “creation mandate” (Gen. 1:26–28) was revoked after the Fall (Gen 3), but that the *Declaration* exhibits the hallmarks of *dominion theology*, in which the rest of creation no longer stands together with humanity as a covenantal partner before the Creator (Hos. 2; Ps. 148).<sup>18</sup> In place of the OT’s own emphases is a subject-object relationship between humanity and nature, thereby identifying an opponent in holistic views of creation that supposedly “ignore our potential, as bearers of God’s image, to add to the earth’s abundance” (a statement from “Our Concerns” in the *Declaration*).

Another noteworthy document is the *Cornwall Stewardship Agenda*, a complement to the Cornwall Alliance’s *Declaration*. Taken together, these documents explain that “free economies” (#7 of the *Declaration*) offer the best path forward to “harness creative potential by expanding political and economic freedom” (as explained in the *Agenda*) in efforts to alleviate global poverty. While this may be true in a globalised world which cannot easily turn back the clock on modernisation, it is troubling that the Cornwall Alliance passes over the Bible’s emphasis that the “righteous rich” are always few in

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<sup>18</sup> For an Asian theologian’s insightful summary and critique of dominion theology in the United States, see Chia 2020.

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number—western imperialism often played a role in creating and/or reinforcing the systemic inequities that are proverbial in the non-western world.

To be sure, there is a passing acknowledgment in the *Declaration* on “the negative effects of much past pollution” (under the “Our Concerns” section). But to attribute particular transgressions in history to the timeless truth that “since the fall into sin people have often ignored their Creator, harmed their neighbors, and defiled the good creation” (theological affirmation #5 in the *Declaration*) is euphemistic at best for the predation of nominally Protestant imperialism. The appropriation of people and resources from the colonies of western nations has reverberated across the centuries in ways that are still felt today.<sup>19</sup>

Even if it were granted that open markets are the best means to generate wealth for all, the history of liberal democratic capitalism and its acquisitive instincts militate against the notion that “free economies” result with consistency in “genuine care for the environment” (#7 in the *Declaration*). Richard Goetz has observed that capitalism and Christianity are conflicted friends at best, since the former requires consumerism to such a degree that the latter must always act to restrain it (Goetz 2014). In its willingness to embrace climate-change denialism, the Cornwall Alliance thus lies outside the mainstream of Christian advocacy for capitalism, such as the Acton Institute’s recognition that a truly biblical theology of economics can only be found in a system that is “neither capitalism nor socialism” (Blomberg 2012).

The theological argumentation of those like the Cornwall Alliance also explains why climate-change denialism and climate apocalypticism can converge at times. These positions share an emphasis on God’s rule over the created order, as can be seen in the commentary below by the American theologian Wayne Grudem:

It does not seem likely to me that God would set up the world to work in such a way that human beings would eventually destroy the earth by doing such ordinary and morally good and necessary things as breathing, building a fire to cook or keep warm, burning fuel to travel, or using energy for a refrigerator to preserve food (quoted in “An Open Letter to the Signers of ‘Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action’ and Others Concerned About Global Warming,” n.d.).

In this statement of Grudem’s from a different Cornwall Alliance publication, it is intriguing that climate-change denialism operates more on the basis of theological *probability* rather than biblical *exegesis*.<sup>20</sup> Such a posture is not so different from the posture of climate apocalypticists, who share Grudem’s assumptions about divine transcendence and sovereignty over creation but find arguments from probability to be

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<sup>19</sup> For example, see the recent scholarship on the enormity of the British Empire’s ‘drain’ from colonial India by Patnaik 2017.

<sup>20</sup> To be fair, Grudem does discuss biblical texts in his chapter on ecology in Grudem (2010:320–29). However, that book’s discussion of the Bible still relies on the probabilistic logic of an argument from silence: ‘There is no hint that mankind will ever exhaust the earth’s resources by developing them or using them wisely’ (329). The crux of the issue, of course, is whether the Old Testament, history, and science show humanity to have been a wise steward of creation.

unnecessary since Scripture is clear enough that climate upheaval will definitely happen in the “end times.”<sup>21</sup>

Climate apocalypticists work out their assumption that God reigns over history in a manner that leads to rather different conclusions from climate-change deniers: “[C]limate change is either a hoax or, if it is real, it must be divinely ordained and fit within the biblical story of divine creation and destruction. Such a view would hold that climate change exists, but there is nothing we as humans can do about it” (Lee 2016:23–24). There is a close theological synergy between this kind of fatalism about creation’s downfall and pessimistic accounts of the “end times,” as summarised in this way by a climate apocalypticist turned ex-Christian:

After all, the Bible teaches that everything on the earth will be destroyed one day. Climate change, famine, natural disasters, war—all of these are, as written in the book of Matthew [and numerous OT passages], things Jesus said would happen. He said it would get so bad that if the period of “tribulation” wasn’t cut short, all life on earth would be destroyed (Nichols 2019).

Interpretations of OT texts about creation thus feature in both climate-change denialism and climate apocalypticism. The former holds that climate change may have happened in the past but God’s power and fidelity to his promises will prevent it from occurring again (cf. Gen. 8:22 and the Flood), while the latter finds that God’s power and fidelity to his warnings ensures that it will certainly happen on a future day of judgment (cf. Isa. 34:1–5; Joel 2:28–30; Amos 5:18–20).

## Conclusion

The creation theology of stewardship by Desmond Tutu and his holistic persuasion lies closer to the heart of Old Testament ecology than the creation theology of dominion which was attributed to western Christianity by Lynn White. It may be tempting to view this clash in religio-cultural terms as the superiority of Majority World theologies over First World ones. Nevertheless, the reality of a globalised world means that dualistic understandings of creation are no longer confined to the west any more than holism is the sole province of the non-west. For instance, climate-change denialism can be common in Brazil despite its shrinking rain forests (Muggah and Margolis 2022), as much as western theologians are demonstrating why the anthropocentrism that degrades creation is rooted in human sinfulness rather than the Bible.<sup>22</sup> Whither next for creation theology, given that orthodoxy and heterodoxy are both now found “from everywhere to everyone”<sup>23</sup>?

Perhaps the way forward for creation theology in all its contextual richness lies in remembering that the first part of Scripture’s canon was the Hebrew Bible for Jews before it became the Old Testament for Christians. Re-examination of these Jewish roots

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<sup>21</sup> The causal relationships in American Christianity between personal eschatology and one’s views on the climate debates are the subject of empirical analysis by Barker and Bearce (2013).

<sup>22</sup> The works of Richard Bauckham and Alister McGrath have been instrumental in showing that creation care does not equate to nature worship. See Bauckham (2010) and McGrath (2002).

<sup>23</sup> With no disrespect intended to an early and important book on globalisation and Christian mission by Escobar (2003).

furnishes a crucial self-awareness by being “as much as the Mother as the Other” (Ivan Kalmar 2019:133) for the Christian tradition, thereby offering a unique combination of insider and outsider perspectives for doing theology. In this regard, Abraham Joshua Heschel reintroduces Judaism’s understanding of the Sabbath with an invitation that offers both the developing and developed worlds a better way of being human than the debilitating pursuit of more productivity from the self and an impersonal nature:

How proud we often are of our victories in the war with nature, proud of the multitude of instruments we have succeeded in inventing, of the abundance of commodities we have been able to produce. Yet our victories have come to resemble defeats. In spite of our triumphs, we have fallen victims to the work of our hands; it is as if the forces we had conquered have conquered us. ... The seventh day is the armistice in man’s cruel struggle for existence, a truce in all conflicts, personal and social, peace between man and man, man and nature, peace within man; a day on which handling money is considered a desecration, on which man avows his independence of that which is the world’s chief idol. ... In the tempestuous ocean of time and toil there are islands of stillness where man may enter a harbor and reclaim his dignity. The island is the seventh day, the Sabbath, a day of detachment from things, instruments and practical affairs as well as of attachment to the spirit (Heschel 1951:27–28).

In rediscovering such a theology from the Hebrew Bible, the Christian tradition in every place will once again hear the call of creation which loud and busy lives in modernity often drown out:

- <sup>1</sup> The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
- <sup>2</sup> Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.
- <sup>3</sup> There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;
- <sup>4</sup> yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world. (Ps 19:1–4 NRSV)

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