

# Preaching the 'green gospel' in our environment: A re-reading of Genesis 1:27-28 in the Nigerian context

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The article focuses on the text of Genesis 1:27–28 within its broader context where the author, the Jahwist, describes humankind as charged with the responsibility to fill and to subdue the earth, which has generally been misunderstood by wealth prospectors. Our methodology is a simplified historical and exegetical study of the two verses of the creation narrative in order to join other contemporary theologians to argue the right of humans to treat the nonhuman as private property as source of material wealth is immoral. As we re-read the text, our findings resonate with the contemporary clarion call for respect and protection of the environment such as COP 2015 in Paris. This provides the justification of our title 'Preaching the green gospel', especially in the Nigerian oil-rich states and in Africa in general. Whilst the paper presents a disquisition of the global efforts of the church through sensitisation of their members to appreciate the magnitude of the environmental pollution and the apocalypse it holds for the world, it draws attention to the possibility of the envisaged doomsday that may descend on Nigeria and other parts of Africa if the crass environmental degradation and the rate of pollution of flora and fauna are not checked. The paper takes cognisance of the positive views expressed by the evangelists of the 'New Theology' in Africa. Whilst the paper raises Biblically friendly ecological awareness in modern Africa, using Nigeria as a contact point, it concludes, inter alia, that the text demands humankind to partake in God's will for order and peace in the universe as it struggles to maintain the ecological sustainability of mother earth.

## Introduction

In recent years, theologians have seriously turned their attention to the ecological and environmental challenges in the world. Scholars like Alexy (1997), Boff (1995), Collison (1986), Edwards (1995), Gibellini (1995) and Kanagaraj 1998 share similar views on the ecological disorientation on earth today. Besides the abovementioned theologians, many other contemporary theologians like Birch (1990), Christiansen and Grazer (1994), Fragomeni and Pawlikowski (1994), Hallman (1995, Haught (1993), Manus (2010), McDonagh (1990) and Ruether (1992) have addressed themselves to the increasingly notable degradation of nature and the human habitat. These theologians have challenged the world church to struggle to resist the ecological apocalypse that threatens to descend on earth. They continue to alert the faith-communities of the dangers posed by the exploitative tendencies of humankind. They are inviting all people of goodwill to recognise that '... the hierarchy of human over nonhuman nature is a relationship of ontological and moral value' (Gibellini 1995:130). In other words, '... the right of the humans to treat the nonhuman as private property and material wealth to be exploited' as is being done in the Niger Delta, the rich oil-producing region of Nigeria, must not be left unchallenged (Nwaomah 2008). Some of these scholars have, from the Christological perspective, called for a halt of the debacle in the name of the cosmic Christ (McCarthy 1994:31–35; Santmire 1995:270).

At the 1972 United Nations (UN) Conference at Stockholm, Sweden, the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Commission of the Churches on International Affairs challenged the Christian faithful and their churches to recognise the magnitude of the environmental pollution and its catastrophic consequences for the *oikumene* (Elsdon 1992:13–14). Apart from this flurry of sensitisation, are we not as people of faith challenged by the consequences of climate change in our world today? Earth-friendly church people and their local theologians have initiated and conducted many seminars to share in the discourse on the survival of the human race and have directed that nations and peoples should seek ways and means to tackle the mounting ecological problems of the world. In 1983, a historic conference was held in Vellore, India, on the theme 'Christian perspectives on stewardship of the earth's resources'. In 1989, from the Inter-Church

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Consultation in Basel emerged a declaration called 'Peace with justice for the whole creation'. In 1990, the epoch-making World Convocation held in Seoul, South Korea, promulgated the communiqué titled 'Justice, peace and integrity of creation'. In that same year, 1990, Pope John Paul II, taking a stand on the theological implications of the 'image and likeness of God' in humankind, declared that human beings bear the responsibility of being trustees, care-givers and sustainers of the earth and its resources. He made us remember that '... God entrusted the whole of creation to man and woman, and only then – as we read – could He rest' (JP II 1990:1). In 1991, the WCC Canberra Conference reaffirmed the same theme. The interventions of the churches touched on world concerns. In the following year, 1992, Brazil hosted a world jamboree at Rio de Janeiro, tagged 'The earth summit', which had produced *The Rio declaration* as a consensus statement at that time. Here in Africa and in Nigeria in particular, all the church seminars and summits indicate to us that a growing collective consciousness is arising on the part of churches' think tanks and their leaders concerning ecological challenges.

Despite these global efforts, in Africa, the tragedy of the random and senseless destruction of the natural environment continues unabatedly. This is largely due to the fact that our generation has a nonchalant attitude towards environmental issues. In short, there is no serious action plan against the predictions by environmental activists, NGOs and some natural scientists of an ecological doomsday. The environmental degradation and the pollution of the flora and fauna of Owaza in Abia state, Nigeria, telecast on the Nigerian Television Authority Network at 9.00 pm on 27 February 2009, was indeed the tip of the iceberg. The pollution of a tributary of the river Benue in the Benue state of Nigeria with cyanide by a cassava processing company is outrageous. Similar questions can be asked about the ecological degradation in the Niger Delta, the oil-producing area of Nigeria? Could the region's poverty and environmental pollution not explain why the youth and some pundits continue to be so restive? Do we not know that what is happening in the region can be likened to the novelist's dictum 'Water, water everywhere but not any drop to drink' (Nwaomah 2007)? Our forest ecosystems are suffering constant destruction, resulting in the extinction of rare species of trees, animals and medicinal plants (Manus 2003:380–383). Places of natural beauty like the Obudu Ranch in the very south of Nigeria and the Lake Victoria Falls, The Lake Nakuru Wildlife Resort and the Massai Mara in Kenya, which God has given Africa, are being made to deny Africans the chance to enjoy a healthier biosphere. Do we ever talk about the industrial emissions and agricultural pollutants which are dumped into our soil by way of chemical fertilisers, which are continuing to poison the free air that people breathe, with hazardous consequences for the depletion of the ozone layer and global warming?

The flaring of gas from the Nigeria oil wells, the constant vandalising of pipe lines, the concomitant inferno and the

leaking of toxic gas in Nigeria are causing environmental havoc and inestimable health hazards to the surrounding population. The flow of waste water into rural streams and rivers and the constant blockage of gutters and sewage system in our urban areas with polythene bags have provided breeding grounds for mosquitos to such an extent that the government's aim and its programme 'Roll back malaria' are defeated. Indiscriminate increase in the population of people in the major cities has taken on alarming proportions. The volume of traffic jams have increased the level of carbon-monoxide emissions that spread diseases like lung-cancer, asthma, chronic bronchial infections and cardiac disorders that send many African citizens to their graves quite early.

Given this context and the high level of pollution in many cities of Africa, one can now ask: What is the role of theologians, students of religion, scholars and the church with reference to environmental challenges? In other words, what are African Christians and church communities doing to convince their followers to begin to work against the impending doom that may arise from human negligence, degradation, pollution and the exploitation of creation? Indeed, the root cause of the environmental crisis has largely been humankind's misguided values and attitudes towards nature. Many a Christian scientist, industrialist and technocrat have exploited nature for selfish profit and have developed unwarranted technology to further torture nature (Osborn 1993:22–23). Some scholars have argued that Western Christianity had taught that it is God's will for humankind to exploit the earth for selfish interests as they claim that God has given humanity dominion over nature. For them, the much-coveted values and advancement in modern science and technology are prompted by traditional Christian arrogance toward nature (White 1992:114)

In this light, we attempt in this paper, through the historical and exegetical methods, to *re-read* Genesis 1:27–28 to deduce dependable theological reasons that can help us argue against this anti-faith position. Thus in *re-reading* Genesis 1:27–28, we aim at *re-examining* Hebrew creation theology even though a new breed of theologians such as Belinda Spannenberg has advised Christian theologians to begin to make the connection between the old ways and the new ways of doing theology by critically embracing the vision of the emergent practical theology as the spirit of the new theology. It is brokering a rather positive reality in theological education in the post-modern world, especially when seen through the lens of the approaches adopted to pursue the kind of ecological concerns that eco-feminism envisages (Manus 2010). In spite of the insight gleaned from Spannenberg's (n.d.) 'new theology', our objectives are, however, to demonstrate that the account in Genesis 1:27–28 does not endorse or legitimise the exploitation of the earth. A major objective of the paper is to recommend the need for faith people in Africa to begin to get involved in ecological concerns on the African continent and especially in Nigeria with its huge oil and gas industries. It is our hope that the effort will awaken the Christian church leadership and the African theological community to begin

to recognise that the environment is indeed a *locus theologicus*. We believe that, individually, all of us have a responsibility to address ourselves to the ecological well-being of humanity in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Since, in the view of Germain Grisez, theology is correctly accepted as '... thought and talk about God and also about ourselves and everything else, considered in relation to God' (Grisez 1983:3) and since, in a universally applicable sense, it is in Christ that all things are created and He is the Lord of all things (Gustafson 1975:169–179). Commitment to environmental issues falls within the provenance of the theological enterprise. There are serious ecological concerns in the Bible, hence we propose to offer here, however brief it may appear, an interpretive reading of Genesis 1:27–28 to show how people living in a post-modern age may appreciate the fact that the Bible transmits real matters of ecological concern. It is a well-known fact that science and environmental activists have failed to convince the world of its responsibility to the need for an attitudinal change towards the environment. By thus re-reading the creation narrative of the Old Testament, we intend to raise Biblically friendly ecological awareness in modern Africa and Nigeria.

## Genesis 1:27–28: Its brief history

Here we are confronted with a text from the 6th century BCE, which followed the Babylonian exile. The priestly author seems to have relied on an Ancient Near-Eastern myth which helped him to provide insight into a cosmic scenario he portrays as a highly artistic cosmogonic Hebrew narration. Creation comes into being when God imposes order on non-personal chaos as He sets light into being. In its broader literary context, the text under study belongs to Genesis 1:24–31 which is devoted to the story of the creation of terrestrial creatures and human beings. It ends with a vision of God's satisfaction and joy in his might and with his handiwork.

The Hebrew text in its transliterated form is as follows:

verse 27 Vay-yiv-ra' 'Elo-him èth ha-a-dam  
b'tzal-mo b'tze'-lem 'Elo-him ba-ra'  
za-char' u-n'ke-vah ba-ra'

verse 28 Vay-va'-rech o-tham 'Elo-him'  
vay-yo-mer la-hem 'Elo-him p'ru u-r'vu'  
u-mil-u eth ha-a'-retz v'chiv-shu-ha  
u-r'du' bid-gath hay-yam u-v'oph hash-sha-ma'-yim  
u-v'chol khay-yah ha-ro-me-seth al ha-a'-retz.

The English version from the African Bible of 1999 reads as follows:

verse 27 God created man in his image:  
in the divine image he created him;  
male and female he created them.

verse 28 God created them, saying to them:  
'Be fertile and multiply;  
fill the earth and subdue it.  
Have dominion over the fish of the sea,  
the birds of the air, and all the living things  
that move on the earth'

In the Revised Standard Version, the verse is translated as follows:

verse 27 So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God He created him;  
male and female He created them.

verse 28 And God blessed them, and God said to them,  
'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it;  
and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the  
birds of the air and over every living thing that moves  
upon the earth.'

## The structure of the text of Genesis 1:24–31

Aware of the topical motifs within the larger context itself, Genesis 1:24–31 can be structured into three smaller units. This is done for easy comprehension and handling the interpretation. The units are verses 24–26, verses 27–28 (which is at the centre of the debate in this article) and verses 29–31, the wrap-up unit.

### Verses 24–26

In this unit, the creation of animals and plant life are presented as the offspring of the earth (v. 24). In spite of the fact that the earth-based creatures derive their reproductive capacity from the earth, God is their Creator (v. 25). As in most African cosmogonic myths, especially amongst the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, *Chi-na-ike* is God the Creator who created the world out of nothing. He is *Chukwu Onye Okike*, that is, Creator and Great Father. They are intimately linked to the earth and are related to it (Ps 104:18). Hence these creatures are entitled to respect and protection as much as mother earth. On earth, humanity has a different status (Ps 8:5–7; Ezk 28:12). They are God's notable creatures and occupy a special place in creation. They are quite like the heavenly beings but not equal to them (Gn 1.26; I Kgs 22:19–22; Ps 82:1). Whilst God rules over humanity, humanity rules over the living things on earth. In sum, God brought into being order (v. 1), birds and kinds of aquatic creatures (v. 21), which constitute the core creatures of God's creative activity.

### Verses 27–28

Here, it is narrated that God convokes his heavenly court and determines to create humankind in his 'image and likeness', a special dignity which confers on humankind transcendence and ascribes them authority over the rest of creation. From the above comments, we note that the stress in this unit is laid on God's creation of humankind as male and female, that is, humankind as a whole. The author adopts the Hebrew term *adam* in its collective conception to denote the fact that the two sexes are created simultaneously. This means that their equality as humans is indicated in the collective term. He endows and blesses humankind with reproductive capacity so that He does not have to come to create persons regularly. Procreation is conferred as divine gift, and by that fiat, humankind is charged with the

responsibility of multiplying to fill the earth. Humanity is then given the commission to 'subdue' the earth, namely to partake in God's will for order and peace in the universe and to maintain the ecological sustainability of mother earth.

### Verses 29–31

In this unit, the creation of food for humankind to eat predominates. Mankind is granted the right to eat every grain, fruit and vegetable. The woman and the man are assigned the responsibility to cultivate green plants and use the same to sustain the growth of their animals. In fact, mankind is created to feed on vegetables. In verse 31, the priestly author sums up his account. God surveys his handworks, finds them good and finds fulfilment in creation. He rests. Chaos is banished. Order prevails. The earth is inhabited, and humankind is charged to sustain God's created order. Humankind is therefore portrayed as the grand finale of creation on the sixth day of the creation business.

## A brief interpretation of the text: Genesis 1:27–28

In line with the structure we have etched on the text and the basic outline of the units therein – and after the earth has been ordered to bring forth cattle, creeping things and wild animals – we are treated to the fact that the Creator convokes his heavenly assistants and gives them a directive:

Na-aseh a-dam b'tzal-me-nu kid-mu-the-nu  
'Let us make man in our own image and likeness'.

On this text, we wish to agree with other commentators that the use of the plural form here is 'a plural of God's majesty and fullness of divinity' (Anderson 1994:15; Olanisebe 2004; Von Rad 1961:6; Westermann 1982:6). The commentators go on to uphold the view that the plural form in both the expression 'Let us ...' and 'Elohim', the Hebrew word for God, draws attention to 'the solemnity of the moment when God is about to make his most noble creature', mankind (The African Bible 1999:26) in his own image (*selem*) and likeness. The image of God in man, according to Hill (1998), has the following implication:

[It] suggests that image conveys the notion that humans gain their worth and dignity from being crowned in the manner of kings and queens, and are assigned to represent God in creation. (p. 38)

As images of God, humans are charged to represent the caring and creative will of God. As Brennan Hill (1998:38) further notes, '... since Yahweh was a God of constant love, compassionate care, and saving power, this was to be the role of humans toward all of creation'. As the bearers of the image of God and the ones who name the animals, the status supposes that humanity freely and responsibly acts in partnership with God in the creative business.

The high point in verse 27 is determined by the verb *bara* [to create]. It is used in the Old Testament to connote divine

activity.<sup>1</sup> The creation of man and woman signified in the collective term *adam* [mankind] is the climax of God's creation. The two sexes are created at the same time, a fact which supposes gender equality in the divine economy (Manus 1999:60–61). In verse 28, the author brokers the summit of the divine work of creation and the general implications of his work on planet earth. Humanity is blessed and empowered to transmit the life it has received from God. By this, it is made co-creator with God. Apart from this singular power, humankind is enjoined to subdue the earth. By no means does the verb *chib-shu-ha* (kal imperative, in its plural notation, 2nd person with the suffix *b'* in the 3rd person singular from *kabash* [to subdue]) in verse 28d suppose a command or permission to exploit or misuse nature. Commentators like Nobert Lohfink inform us that what is implied in the verb is rather a blessing (Lohfink 1989:7–8). For us, what the Hebrew author teaches here with the verb is that it is a divine injunction to handle nature responsibly so that it can be productive to support life on earth. God's order does not justify the exploitation of the earth's resources (Bateye 2004:181–182). To destroy and pollute nature is a desecration, indeed an offense against the Creator. Thus, it must be emphasised that environmental issues have moral dimensions. Pollution of the air with deadly gases, the dumping of toxic waste material on the land as it once happened in Koco town near Warri, Nigeria, and the reckless felling and lumbering of the best trees in Africa's rainforests are not only offenses against mother earth but also moral offenses against God, the Creator (Hill 1998:61). It is in this light that we can appreciate the spirit of John McConnell's *Earth Magna Charter*:

Let every individual and institution now think and act as a responsible trustee of Earth, seeking choices in ecology, economics and ethics that will provide a sustainable future, eliminate pollution, poverty and violence, awaken the wonder of life and foster peaceful progress in the human adventure. (n.p.)

Besides, God gave humankind the right to *radah* [to rule or to have dominion] over the fish, the birds and all animate creatures on earth. The terms, subdue and dominion, have evoked much debate amongst scholars and preachers alike. The African Bible commentators who had worked from the African perspective observe in comments to the African Bible (1999) that to subdue the earth:

... does not mean exploitation. It means that as God's stewards (Ps 8:6–8), they have to take good care of what God has created and entrusted to them by using and maintaining the environment in such a way that the earth, plant life, animal life and human beings can co-exist in a harmonious relationship that promotes God's gift of life (p. 26).

Furthermore, Margaret Okorodudu-Fubara, a reputed environmental lawyer at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, in her exposition of the essence of environmental law deposes the following:

..., the earth's natural resources were not given to man to 'destroy', 'pollute' or 'degrade'. It is a reasonable inference

1. See Gn 1: 20-23, 24-30; 2:2-4a; Is 40:26, 28; 45: 18.

therefore that endowment of the earth's natural resources to man by the Creator is intended for the advancement of the welfare of man towards this goal. This is one perspective – the natural law of environmental protection.

In short, humankind's commission and empowerment to 'fill the earth and subdue it' is nothing else but a divine injunction to join in God's will for order and sustainability on earth.

## Contextual reflections from our discussion

From the analysis we have made from the context of the text, its structure and positive meanings, it can be argued that the creation theology of the book of Genesis establishes both humans and animals as living beings. Both are blessed with the capacity to procreate and reproduce their species. As we have remarked earlier on, unlike the other creatures, humankind is obliged *to rule* and *to have dominion* over all the things that live, move and have their being on the earth. Tragically, however, as Hill (1998:38; Bateye 2004:181) correctly opines, '... the passage has all too often been distorted and used to justify the domination of both human beings and nature'. According to White (1967; 1977), a seriously literal understanding of the text has led to the extensive exploitation of the environment. The dominion which had been granted to humans over all living things on earth does not imply the will for exploitation or abuse. Rather, what is meant is a royal duty, a princely right which humans share with God as his representatives and co-creators to should act in justice and care for the environment. On this, Hill (1998:41) deposes that human beings '... are created to share a personal relationship with God and, by reason of this relationship, are called to represent the Creator in sustaining order, peace and harmony on the earth'. In this perspective, Bernard Anderson (1994:130 quoted in Hill 1998) has rightly asserted the following:

... the special status of human kind as the image of God is a call to responsibility, not only in relation to other humans, but also to all of nature. Human dominion is not to be exercised recklessly but wisely and benevolently so that it may be, to some degree, the sign of God's rule over the creation. (p. 41)

Claus Westermann agrees that dominion alludes to the responsible care of a leader over subjects, that is, the leader takes full responsibility for the well-being of the people, land and country (Westermann 1982:98). Indeed, we agree with Hill (1998) in his classic affirmation:

Israel's creation theology never indicates that the earth was created to be exploited by humans. Rather, humans are commissioned to sustain creation with Yahweh's ultimate purpose in mind, and in such a way that creation will give glory to the Creator. (p. 41)

On a rather radical note, Belinda Spannenberg, a revivalist theologian and a prophetic evangelist of the *Lighthouse Ministries* in South Africa, and her associate, Phil Wiegand (n.d.), advise that Christian religion should focus on what matters most to God and what is achievable through,

according to them, the *KingdomNomics* principles and credible benefits here and now. In *Kingdom-based life*, there is need for discipline, wisdom and sacrifice. Therefore, humankind's interpretation of the Christian conception of eschatology in which heaven is a promise for and hope of the good-willed and perfect faithful ought to dispose of many secularist, materialist thinkers and capitalists who still cling dedicatedly to profiting from the earth's resources and its exploitation here and now for the living. Rather, Christians should re-think their views and rather ask themselves 'what they are depositing into the Bank of Heaven'? For the new theologians, earth's resources are wealth which humankind shall leave behind as it departs this world to the hereafter. In the hereafter, there is no place for material enjoyment but only eternal life that God has hallowed and set apart for the redeemed.

## Conclusion

The foregoing analysis reveals much for us with which to conclude this article. The two verses we have briefly but critically and exegetically examined with the scanty literature available to us in our work place draw attention to the fact that Genesis 1:27–28 does not yield any evidence to support the exploitation of creation in the contemporary world. Such human exploitative tendencies today would have been viewed by ancient Hebrews as insolence to God's benevolent commission. The ambition to gain mastery of nature was not considered a value in traditional Israelite setting. In fact, nature was held as far beyond man's control, which, on its own, could sometimes even devastate and destroy humanity and its civilisations. Global warming has disrupted weather patterns. In recent times, there have been extreme conditions, resulting in heat-waves, droughts in parts of Eastern and Southern Africa and several incidents of severe storms in many Western African countries. Garbage dumping and bush fires have degraded much of Africa's arable land. The constant flooding of our cities and rural villages and the menace of gully erosions in South-eastern Nigeria today are cases in point. For the Hebrews whose Bible we read and believe in, the earth is the Lord's property, and we humans are mere creatures charged with the responsibility to care for it in his name. Herein originates the notion of stewardship. The author of the Book of Genesis assures us that God has commissioned human beings to participate in his ongoing process of creation through legitimate procreation, appropriate land-use and industrialisation.

Christian doctrines on creation have neither misconceived the Hebrew creation theology nor denied it at all. In orthodox Christian tradition, the concept of 'dominion' had not been taken to mean domination. Jeremy Cohen has re-assured us that nowhere in early Christian documents, such as those of the Desert Fathers', Celtic saints', Francis of Assisi and Medieval theologians' sources, have we learnt that dominion meant permission to dominate and exploit the environment (Cohen 1989:5). Rather, the notions of the *imago Dei* [divine image and dominion] have over the years been employed to defend human dignity against discriminatory policies and social injustice in some societies (Hill 1998:42).

In sum then, it must be emphasised that the interpretation given to the terms 'dominion' and 'subdue' to connote permission for exploitation is due mainly to modernity's erroneous bid to lay claim to a divine injunction to justify the pursuit of its insatiable desires. In the wake of the discovery of the New World, Renaissance humanism, the Enlightenment, colonialism, the slave trade, the emergence of science and technology and so-called globalisation, the ecological crisis has been caused to dawn on humanity, threatening habitation on this earth broken by insurgencies, terrorism and graft and corruption. Where creation theology has been employed to justify the mastery of the world, it has arisen as a distortion of the original meaning of Genesis 1:27–28 as well as other cognate Hebrew texts. Members of African theological communities and students of religious studies, this is our submission aimed at giving pro-active impetus and encouragement to theological engagement in the scholarly study of religions as a subject with versatile ecological interests and Mother-Earth's preservation in the kingdom of man in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

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## Authors' contributions

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