



# Life in its fullness: Ecology, eschatology and ecodomy in a time of climate change



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Given the close relationship of ecodomy with other words that also derive from *oikos* – especially economy and ecology – the term 'ecodomy' opens a space for dialogue with other disciplines, especially economics and the physical and social sciences. The Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the Archbishop of Constantinople, known as the 'Green Patriarch', identifies the climate change crisis as a '*kairos* moment' for churches and the world, warning that the time is short for the world to take decisive action. We argue that the apocalyptic tradition of Scripture can help as we face this new *kairos* moment. The argument is that the biblical Book of Revelation sheds light in at least two ways: firstly, to frame this crisis in terms of eschatology, and secondly, to help us envision future hope for a new creation and life on earth. If ecodomy is eschatology put into practice, it can help us address the climate crisis. We can name our moment as a *kairos* moment, a moment of hope and urgency. And we can draw on the apocalyptic witness of Scripture to address this crisis, not with despair but with hope – hope for what the Gospel of John calls 'abundant life', hope for a renewal of the whole community of earth, the ecodomy, hope for 'life in all its fullness'.

**Contribution:** The focus of this article is on the ecodomy use of the term *kairos*. The coherence of this article is a triangulation of ecodomy, ecology and eschatology, where climate change is the epitome of the ecological crisis and *kairos* is the demand. This brings theology and nature into consonance.

**Keywords:** Ecodomy; Ecology; Eschatology; *Kairos*; Climate change; Book of Revelations; Earth-keeping; Inter-faith dialogue.

## Introduction

Ecodomy is a fairly newly invented word in the literature about eco-theology, first brought into the *oeuvre* of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria already in 1997 (Buitendag 1997:881), and it was chosen as the official *Faculty Research Theme* (FRT) in 2014, as Buitendag (2019a) states in his reflections on the genealogy of the 'Pretoria Model':

In 2014, I introduced the concept of ecodomy to the Faculty, and it was accepted as the overarching Faculty Research Theme (FRT) for the decade to follow. I encountered this concept for the first time in a publication of the World Council of Churches (Muller-Fahrenheit 1995). He addresses the current world crises with regard to ecological and social disequilibria. We need new visions for 'household politics' (*oikodomia*) on the one hand and a reinterpretation of the traditional 'aliens in a foreign land' (*paroikia*) on the other hand. The constructive and immanent thrust of ecodomy must incorporate the element of critical non-conformity. (p. 5)

Ecodomy (pronounced like ecology and economy with the accent on the connecting vowel) is a transliteration of the Greek lemma *oikodomē* (Kok 2015):

The verb *oikodomēō* occurs approximately 40 times in the New Testament. 'According to Louw and Nida (1996:ad loc) – who put the words *oikodomēō*, *epoikodomēō*, *oikodomē* and *ἡς* f: in the semantic domain 74.15 – in the NT these terms denote the following meaning: "to increase the potential of someone or something, with focus upon the process involved ... to strengthen, to make more able, to build up." The verbs *oikodomēō*, *oikodomēō* and *oikodomē* (v) (noun) (1 Cor 14:12) denote the act of building or constructing or edifying, or the result thereof (a building/construction), whereas the noun *oikodōmos* refers to the "builder of a house" or "architect" (Ac 4:11; cf. Lk 20:17). (p. 3)

Muller-Fahrenheit locates its linguistic roots in the image of the world as a 'house' (*oikos*) in which we live together. Ecodomy signifies 'building the house of life' (Muller-Fahrenheit 1995:108). Ecologically, ecodomy is the art of 'inhabiting instead of dominating the earth, our house' (Conradie 2011:118).

**Note:** Special Collection entitled Theology and Nature, sub-edited by Johan Buitendag (UP).

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Given the close relationship of ecodomy with other words that also derive from *oikos* – especially economy and ecology – the term ‘ecodomy’ opens space for dialogue with other disciplines, especially economics and the physical and social sciences. ‘Life in its Fullness’, the sub-topic of the FRT, likewise offers promise for interdisciplinary scholarship. The focus of this article will, therefore, be on interdisciplinary dialogue with climate scientists and policymakers, as we face currently an urgent *kairos* moment for our planet.

The term *kairos* has become increasingly popular in relation to ecological crisis. An ecumenical convention<sup>1</sup> took place during 16–19 June 2019 in Wuppertal, Germany, consisting of 52 participants from 22 countries, with the theme ‘Together towards eco-theologies, ethics of sustainable and eco-friendly churches’ (Wuppertal Call 2019). In their declaration, they declared unanimously: ‘Kairos: A decisive turn in the pilgrimage of justice and peace’. At the 50-year celebration in 2018 of *The Club of Rome*, the appeal was rather vehement: ‘We need a crash plan’, as well as ‘Come on!’ (Members of The Club of Rome 2018; Von Weizsäcker & Wijkman 2018).

The coherence of this article is, therefore, a triangulation of ecodomy, ecology and eschatology, where climate change is the epitome of the ecological crisis and *kairos* the demand.

## Kairos and the climate crisis

*Kairos* is one of two New Testament words used for ‘time’, sometimes indicating an urgent moment or turning of the ages. The apostle Paul uses the word *kairos* to describe creation’s suffering: ‘I consider that the sufferings of this present time (*kairos*) are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed’ (Rm 8:18 Revised Standard Version [RSV]). He also uses it in Romans 13: ‘You know what time (*kairos*) it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep’ (Rm 13:11 New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]). The Book of Revelation uses the term in declaring that the time – or *kairos* – has come, ‘for destroying those who destroy the earth’ (Rv 11:18) – a text with strong ecological implications (Rossing 2014). Reading the signs of the ‘times’ is the meaning of *kairos* in Jesus’ teachings (Lk 12:56).

Thirty-five years ago, the 1985 South African *Kairos Document* issued a prophetic word about apartheid – invoking a sense of *kairos* and referencing the apocalyptic Book of Revelation, a book of the Bible few scholars were reading at the time. The South African *Kairos Document* critiqued the ways the apartheid system was being justified biblically. Apartheid theology distorts Paul’s teaching that all ‘government has been instituted by God’ (Rm 13:2). To counter apartheid, the *Kairos Document* cited chapters 12 and 13 of the Book of Revelation, in which John of Patmos critiques the Roman Empire as a dragon and a beast. The *Kairos Document* (1985) warned that when the:

[S]tate becomes the servant of the dragon (the devil) and takes on the appearance of a horrible beast. Its days are numbered because God will not permit his unfaithful servant to reign forever. (p. 5)

With that prophetic pronouncement based on the Book of Revelation, the *Kairos Document* made a daring claim that was political as well as eschatological: the claim that just as John of Patmos identified the Roman Empire of his time as a satanic beast whose duration was ‘short’, so too were the apartheid system’s days ‘numbered’. In this way, the *Kairos Document* framed that 1985 moment as the turning of age, a ‘*kairos* moment’, an *eschaton* or end.

In the years since 1985, the *Kairos Document* has continued to play a significant role in reshaping biblical hermeneutics of liberation. The term *kairos* is now evoked in other contexts around the world, where people cry out for justice and for ‘life in its fullness’ – whether by Palestinian Christians living under Israeli occupation, or Canadians in the organisation *KAIROS*, working to oppose tar sand fossil fuel extraction. The South African document with its notion of *kairos* has helped to give the world the much-needed vocabulary.

The focus of this article is as indicated on the ecodological use of the term *kairos*. The Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the Archbishop of Constantinople, known as the ‘Green Patriarch’, identifies the climate change crisis as a ‘*kairos* moment’ for churches and the world, warning that the time is short for the world to take decisive action. In 2007, he wrote (His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew 2007) and underscored by Rossing (2009) as follows:

As Orthodox Christians, we use the Greek word ‘*kairos*’ to describe a moment in time, often a brief moment in time, which has eternal significance. When Our Lord Jesus Christ began his preaching, he declared that a decisive moment, a *kairos* (Mark 1:14)<sup>2</sup> had arrived in the relationship between God and mankind. The Mother of God, who prays for and protects mankind, experienced her moment of *kairos* when she received the angel Gabriel and replied, ‘May it be according to your word’. (Luke 1:38). As individuals, we are often conscious of a *kairos*, a moment when we make a choice that will affect our whole lives. (pp. 138–139)

For the human race as a whole, there is now a *kairos*, a decisive time in our relationship with God’s creation. We will either act in time to protect life on earth from the worst consequences of human folly, or we will fail to act. (pp. 2–3)

Since 1995, Patriarch Bartholomew has convened several symposia bringing together scientists, Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) leaders, indigenous leaders, young people and religious leaders to environmentally sensitive places. These gatherings raise concern for the suffering of God’s creation. He held the first symposium on the Greek island of Patmos – the island where John wrote the biblical Book of Revelation. In Greenland in 2007, lamenting catastrophic Arctic melting,<sup>3</sup> he prayed the sobering prayer

1.The conference was planned and organised together by Protestant Association of Churches and Mission (EMW), Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), United Evangelical Mission (UEM), Bread for the World, and WCC.

2.This is actually Mark 1:15.

3.See <http://www.rsesymposia.org/themedia/arcticdossier3.pdf>.

about climate change: May God grant us the wisdom to act in time.

To be sure, climate change (preferable to global warming)<sup>4</sup> is a different kind of *kairos* moment from the apartheid crisis of the 1980s. This time the urgency comes not only from human suffering but also from physics and chemistry, from the limits set by the atmosphere and the oceans. The earth's ability to safely absorb carbon dioxide, to keep temperature increase below the 'safe' level of 2°C, or even less of 1.5°C on which governments have agreed, is limited by the long half-life of carbon dioxide. (See the *Paris Climate Agreement* of the United Nations, December 2015; UNFCCC 2015). Thus, the scientific dimension is paramount. The latest scientific and policy reports from the *Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)* underscore that the path of 'Business as Usual' in terms of coal-burning and current fossil fuel consumption will mean peril for the planet. The climate crisis needs our best science, although it cannot be solved by science alone. It requires courageous and visionary leadership, as well as interdisciplinary dialogues between science and other disciplines. Religious studies can play an important role.

We all share the same earth and that we all, believers and unbelievers, theologians and scientists the like, should move to a point where we all share the value of this planet. Edward Wilson, a naturalist, declares: 'I suggest that we set aside differences to save the Creation' (Wilson 2006:4). Perhaps one of the earliest significant faith contributions to the conservation of the earth is *The Assisi Declarations* (WWF 1986) where messages on humanity and nature were served from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. The meeting was set by Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, and led to the establishment in 1995 of the *Alliance of Religions and Conservation* (ARC).

Several South African theologians have addressed the crisis of climate change, including Ernst Conradie (2010), Geoff Davies (2017), Sakkie Spangenberg (2020), Johan Buitendag (De Villiers & Buitendag 2020) and many others, as well as the 2009 document 'Climate Change: A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa', produced by a committee of the *South African Council of Churches* (SACC 2009). The *World Council of Churches* (WCC), as we have noted, has been at the forefront of climate change advocacy and study, through Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation work, as well as Poverty, Wealth and Ecology work.

The argument is that the apocalyptic tradition of Scripture can help as we face this new *kairos* moment. As a scripture scholar focussing on ecological hermeneutics, the author will argue that the biblical Book of Revelation can help in at least two ways: firstly, to frame this crisis in terms of eschatology, and secondly, to help us envision future hope

<sup>4</sup>Climate change' and 'global warming' have distinct meanings. They refer to events with broadly different scales of space and time. See <https://climate.nasa.gov/resources/global-warming-vs-climate-change/>.

for new creation and life on earth. It will also link to insights on ecology in the biblical tradition.

## Duelling eschatologies: Eternal Rome versus eternal life

'Eschatology' is the name given to the study of the last things – what is ultimate versus what comes to an end. Whilst the primary author of this article studied at Yale Divinity School in the 1970s, there was scant attention paid to eschatology except for a humorous student magazine called 'Eschatology Today'. Its motto was 'All's well that ends'. But it is impossible to forget the New Testament class at Harvard Divinity School that revealed the relevance of eschatology. The assignment was an article by Dieter Georgi about how the Roman Empire of Jesus' time had an eschatology of its own – the credo of 'empire without end' (Georgi 1986:100–125). Roman eschatology of the eternal empire was engraved on monuments and arches, for everyone to see. Official Roman court poets Virgil and Horace proclaimed this credo in their epics and odes. Rome's theology was that the empire itself was eternal and would last forever. Emperor Augustus (27 BCE to 14 CE) was heralded as the 'saviour' (*sotēr*) – born of a human mother and divine father, the god Apollo (Suetonius 1913:267) – whose birth ushered a new 'golden age'.

'World without end' for Rome meant 'empire without end' – in both the spatial sense of conquering the 'ends of the earth' geographically and the temporal sense of lasting forever. Roman propaganda, imperial coins and monuments bore slogans like *Roma Aeterna* – 'eternal Rome' – all promoting the idea that Rome was a divinely ordained way of life, eternally victorious and an empire that was destined to last forever (Dowling 2003:170–183; Pratt 1965: 25–44). Hymns such as Horace's *Carmen Saeculare* included the claim that Rome had already brought about a golden age of peace and prosperity (Punt 2013:1).

One of the most potent illustrations of Roman imperial eschatology is an exquisitely carved cameo from the mid-first-century CE, the *Gemma Augustea*. This carving, on display in Vienna, gives an amazingly candid picture of the Roman Empire as a two-tiered system. The upper tier shows Emperor Augustus and the goddess Roma sharing a throne, their feet resting upon weapons. The next emperor, Tiberius, steps out of a chariot driven by Nike, the winged goddess of military victory. Personified figures of Earth and Ocean, holding a cornucopia and symbols of sea-trade, gaze adoringly at the emperor. Earth and Ocean give their blessing to the Roman system. The lovely figure of *oikoumenē* (the 'Inhabited World' or 'Imperial World') even places a crown on Augustus' head. Underneath, however, the lower register shows the violent military conquest that fuels the whole system. In Abu-Ghraib-like poses, captive figures represent conquered nations that sit naked and humiliated, hands bound behind their backs. They await execution by the Roman soldiers who raise a victory trophy.

Together, the two tiers of this beautiful cameo give an unforgettable window into the Roman imperial system and its eschatology. Rome considered itself to be eternal and blessed, extending its reach to the ends of the earth, the ends of the entire *oikoumenē*. Adoration is the only appropriate response to such a system of benefaction, like the adoring postures of Earth and Ocean.

The *Great Cameo of France* continues Augustus' trajectory of eschatological claims after his death, into the reign of his adopted successor, Tiberius (cf. Ando 1990:287–289). This three-tiered cameo portrays Augustus and Aeneas up in heaven, holding the orb of the globe as a symbol of Rome's divinely sanctioned domination over the entire *oikoumenē*. The deceased emperor gives his blessing to Emperor Tiberius who now reigns on earth, the middle tier. As in the *Gemma Augustea*, the lowest register of the *Great Cameo of France* portrays conquered barbarians with hands bound. What the lower tiers of both cameos underscore with portraits of soldiers subduing captive figures is why resistance to the Roman system would be futile.

What Georgi (1986) argued, however, is that it is precisely against the official Roman eschatological credo of eternity and omnipotence that Jesus and early Christian communities said a firm 'no!' Only God is eternal – not Rome. Although Roman propaganda claimed that the whole earth gazes on adoringly at Roman imperial power, biblical authors make the daring claim that Rome's dominance over the earth – including the creation itself – was coming under God's judgement and, in fact, would soon end according to Roman claims of eternity and omnipotence.

This anti-imperial perspective is clearest in the Book of Revelation, but it is evident in other New Testament texts as well. The apostle Paul is much more anti-empire than we have realised – including in the Epistle of Romans – as Richard Horsley (ed. 2003), Robert Jewett (2004), Jeremy Punt (2013) and others have shown in their work on Romans 8. With his apocalyptic perspective, Paul was creating new communities and new identities, challenging the empire's theology and its eschatology. In his recent *opus magnum*, Andries van Aarde (2020:307–315) applies the expression 'journey on a surpassing road', indicating a 'politics of passion' to Paul's metamorphosis of a *kata sarka* or 'biopolitics' to a *kata pneuma*, where one's life is ruled by the 'Spirit of God'.

'What time is it?' Paul asks, by using the word *kairos*. It is time to wake up (Rm 13:11). Paul declares the time in which he was living to be the 'end of the age'. Such pronouncements about the 'end of the age' (1 Cor 10:11) are not just vague end-of-the-world talk that many of us grew up learning in Sunday school. Nor are they about going to heaven after you die. Phrases such as 'the rulers of this age who are doomed to perish' (1 Cor 2:6) referred the Roman political powers – as seen by the reference two verses later to the rulers' having 'crucified the Lord of glory' (1 Cor 2:8). Christ delivers us from 'this

evil age' (Gl 1:4), a not so veiled criticism of the Roman imperial order's ideology of a present 'golden age' (Kahl 2014:505). In these verses, Paul is making daring anti-imperial pronouncements, undercutting the empire's propaganda.

Moreover, biblical authors – including Paul – prove to have been more astute observers of the ecological damage caused by Roman practices than we have realised. Paul critiques Roman cosmology itself in Romans 8:18–30. The cargo list of Revelation 18:12–13 demonstrates that John of Patmos was aware of the excesses of logging and other extractive practices, as well as the Roman slave trade. He critiques as unjust the overuse of resources for luxury items and cash crops rather than for the necessities of life and health for most of the populace. Some of the effects of Greek and Roman exploitation were *irreversible* and species were made extinct or extirpated from islands or other areas where their natural reintroduction was impossible (Hughes 1994:111).

## Irreversible: The present eschatological moment and the climate crisis

It is striking to see how climate scientists, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the IPCC employ eschatological words such as 'irreversible' to warn us about the urgency of the threat of climate change (UNFCCC Paris Agreement 2015; IPCC Press Release 2014). Within the context that the IPCC uses the term, 'irreversible' is an eschatological term – underscoring a looming 'end'. Scientists tell us we are approaching an 'end' in terms of the limits of carbon dioxide the oceans and atmosphere can safely hold. Even the term 'eschatology' is used in public discourse, although generally with negative connotations.<sup>5</sup>

This can be a very important moment for scholars and public religious leaders who work on eschatology. What is needed is a different vision of 'life in its fullness'. In the same way that the Roman Empire preached a version of life in its fullness to which early Christians would say 'no', today's scholars and leaders may be called to say 'no' to unsustainable structures and systems that threaten the future of life on earth. And we are called to offer an alternative. To use the technical terminology of the IPCC, what nations of the world need to reduce carbon emissions to a safe level is what the IPCC and nations of the world call a different 'shared vision'.<sup>6</sup> This was a term agreed in the Bali Roadmap and Bali Action Plan in December 2007 by the *Conference of Parties* (COP13). The shared vision must recognise the right to development along with the centrality of sharing the atmospheric resources. It must be under the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, considering social and economic conditions and other relevant factors.

A strong sense of an impending 'end' pervades much of the New Testament. But if we look more closely, the 'end' that

5. See for example Jonathan Franzen (2015:56).

6. See [https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2018-08/cop21add1\\_SF\\_EN.pdf](https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2018-08/cop21add1_SF_EN.pdf)

these texts envision seems to be not so much the destruction of the earth (*gē*) or the end of the created world (*kosmos*). Rather, as Rossing has argued (2003), they envision an end to the Roman imperial order of oppression and injustice – an end to what New Testament authors call the *oikoumenē*.

This Greek word that we have mistakenly translated as ‘world’ has contributed to the sense that the New Testament fixates on the end of the created world. Rather, a better translation for *oikoumenē* in Revelation and much of the New Testament is probably ‘empire’, or ‘imperial world’, as reflected in Luke Johnson’s translation of the word as ‘empire’ in Luke 2.1; 4.5; 21.25; Acts 11:28 and 17:6 (Johnson 1991, 1992; see Rossing 2003). Whilst in the Septuagint (LXX) the term may be synonymous with ‘world’, by the time of the New Testament Roman imperial propagandists use the word to mean the ‘civilised world’ – that is, the world to which Rome laid claim for itself.<sup>7</sup> One Roman orator declared that the ‘whole *oikoumenē* prays that Rome’s rule will last forever’ (Aelius Aristides Roman Oration 29).

Against such pro-empire propaganda, it is striking that the New Testament refrains from referring to the *oikoumenē* in any positive sense. This may be because the *oikoumenē* had come by the first century to represent the Roman Empire – an empire that must come to an end. Declarations such as the ‘hour of trial that is coming upon the whole *oikoumenē*’ (Rv 3:10) should then be read not so much as a general end-times tribulation that God will inflict upon the planet earth, as fundamentalists claim, but more pointedly as the trial or judgement that God will bring upon the entire Roman Empire and on all those who benefit from Rome’s injustice (cf. Pablo 1995:61; Rossing 2003:74–87). In other words, it is not the physical, created world that is coming to an end, but rather the structures of empire, the ‘bio-politics’ as Van Aarde depicts it.

The discourse of apocalyptic texts is not escapist or otherworldly, nor despairing of the world, as some have interpreted apocalyptically. The ‘end’ these texts envision is not the end of the created world so much as the end of an unjust empire. Andries van Aarde (2020:108–112) concurs emphasising the ‘fullness of life’. Here we draw on recent scholarship on Jewish apocalyptic, which also influences New Testament eschatology, specifically the work of Thea Young (2011) and Richard Horsley (2009), on 1 and 2 Maccabees as well as 1 Enoch and Daniel. They argue that Jewish apocalyptic literature emerged as a literature of resistance to empire during the Seleucid and Ptolemaic regimes, regimes whose persecution and claims became at times so totalising that they ‘de-created’ the world. In the face of empire and its totalising narrative of conquest and eternal

7. A persuasive case for translating *oikoumenē* as ‘empire’ in much of Luke–Acts was made already in 1991 by Luke Timothy Johnson. His commentary on the Gospel of Luke argues that the context demands the translation ‘empire’ in a verse such as Luke 2:1. (‘In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole *oikoumenē* should be enrolled.’) Similarly, in the temptation narratives when Satan promises all the kingdoms of the *oikoumenē* to Jesus (Lk 4:5), Johnson translates as ‘empire’. He stops short of translating the word as empire, however, when the *oikoumenē* is described as falling under judgement or is threatened with destruction, switching back to the more traditional ‘the inhabited world’ in a verse such as Acts 17:31 or Luke 21:26.

dominance, apocalypses such as Daniel and Revelation provide a counter-narrative – a counter-narrative for the community that includes renewal for the earth.

From a biblical perspective, end of empire does not have to mean the end of the physical, created world. Indeed, Revelation, perhaps more than any other New Testament text, helps us envision concretely this distinction between empire and the created world, with its picture of the millennium in chapter 20, after the destruction of Babylon (or Rome) in Revelation 17–18. The millennium of Revelation represents the ‘vindication time’ for the victims of Roman imperial rule, a concrete period on earth, after the fall of the Roman Empire.

## Eschatology put into practice: Ecodomy as alternative community on earth

Alternative community-building and the notion of ‘ecodominical community’, as proposed by Muller-Fahrenheit (1995), point in promising directions ecologically. Muller-Fahrenheit (1995) makes the case that the epochal project of our time is indeed an ecodominical one:

This concept of ‘ecodomy’ can inspire our search for politics for the ‘house of the earth’. [...] Ecodomy denotes an activity which presupposes hope and confidence. It is eschatology put to practice. (p. 147)

Muller-Fahrenheit finds this ecodominical trajectory most clearly in the Pauline literature. The Epistle of First Peter, too, uses rich metaphorical imagery of ‘house’ (*oikos*), including the verb *οικοδομέω* to create a sense of homecoming for the community. The letter was written for a late first-century community living in Asia Minor whose members likely included several literal resident aliens or exiles (*paroikoi*, *πάροικοι*). The symbolisation of the community as the *household of God* serves as the root metaphor and as organising ecclesial image in 1 Peter.

The author of 1 Peter images the community as a house of living stones, and Jesus Christ himself as a living stone. ‘Living’ (*ζώντος*) is a favourite adjective for this author, signifying resurrection – a ‘living hope’ (*ἐλπίδα ζωσαν*, 1:3), the ‘living word’ (*λόγου ζώντος*, 1:23) and followers of Jesus as a community of ‘living stones’ (*λίθων ζώντα*, 2:4). The verb *οικοδομέω* is used only once, in a powerful ecclesiological metaphor in the plural. Jesus, imaged as a living stone, invites or promises hearers to join in being, ‘built (*οικοδομείσθε*) into a spiritual house’ (Pt 1 2:5). Even if indeed the imperative is intended, as both the RSV and NRSV suggest (but not the King James Version (KJV), the invitation is irresistible.<sup>8</sup> The focus is on the community, imaged as stones that have been brought to life, to be joined with Jesus in being built up the spiritual house.

8. Several questions complicate the interpretation of this passage. One question is whether to translate the verb *οικοδομείσθε* as an indicative or an imperative (‘you are being built up’ or ‘be yourselves built up’), as both are grammatically possible. The question is whether God or we are the primary ones doing the building.

As Muller-Fahrenheit cautions, the ecclesiology of 1 Peter, with its focus on the image of exiles or *paroikoi* (πάροικοι) away from home, can 'foster an escapist spirituality' (Muller-Fahrenheit 1995:110). The image of 'spiritual house' risks giving the sense that the Christians' true homeland is only in the heavens, not the earth – although that move is not made in 1 Peter. Yet ecodomy, the verb in 1 Peter 2:5 (οικοδομεῖσθε), can help us, if it is imaging an alternative community, like the way Muller-Fahrenheit argues Pauline tradition imaged early Christian churches as 'ecodomic centres' on earth (Muller-Fahrenheit 1995:109). Drawing analogies to today, he coins the adjectival term, 'ecodomic'. He sees an 'ecodomic character' at the heart of the WCC conciliar processes such as the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation. He explores the 'ecodomic vocation of Christian' and the 'ecodomic covenant', as well as a vision of churches as 'ecodomic centres' (Muller-Fahrenheit 1995:135). 'Ecodomic endurance' rooted in the Spirit gives the community eschatological staying power in the face of ecological destruction and violence, 'when time threatens to come to an end' (Muller-Fahrenheit 1995:144). This makes sense, of course, because most scholars situate 1 Peter, very much in line with the Pauline tradition. 'The epochal project of our time is indeed an ecodomic one', concludes Muller-Fahrenheit (1995:147).

Muller-Fahrenheit (1995:135) perhaps presses the service of ecodomy a bit far, however, when he expands at length on how ecodomy and the related adjectival form, 'ecodomic', can help us face crises of violence and ecological destruction. He sees an 'ecodomic character' at the heart of the WCC conciliar processes such as the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation. He explores the 'ecodomic vocation of Christian', the notion of 'ecodomic union', 'ecodomic covenant' and 'ecodomic centres'. Perhaps most sobering is his chapter on 'ecodomic endurance' rooted in the Spirit (Muller-Fahrenheit 1995:144), which gives the community staying power in the face of ecological destruction and violence, 'when time threatens to come to an end' (Muller-Fahrenheit 1995:144). A concluding chapter (3.22), namely 'Imagining the Peace of Creation: Suggestions for an Ecodomic Agenda', sketches aspects of the ecological crisis.

Our thesis now is as follows: If Muller-Fahrenheit is correct that ecodomy is eschatology put into practice, then it offers a positive frame for ecological work today that images an alternative way of life. Therefore, 'aliens in a foreign land' (πάροικοι) is the flipside of the coin. 'The constructive and immanent thrust of ecodomic communities must incorporate the element of critical non-conformity' (Muller-Fahrenheit 1995:109).

It is curious, however, that the term has not received more widespread use since its publication by Muller-Fahrenheit in 1995. Perhaps the South African context – the 2014 conference of the Faculty at Pretoria and the subsequent publications (cf. footnote 1) – has propelled the term into wider usage. Muller-Fahrenheit's notion of 'Eschatology Put into Practice' is a rich one. Part of the problem may be that in English, the

loanword term sounds harder than in other languages. I suggest looking beyond ecodomy, to other New Testament (NT) texts where the word *oikos* itself is not used, to find resonances with the conference sub-theme of 'Life in its Fullness'. We will build on the notion of 'eschatology put into practice', looking especially at the Book of Revelation.

## Life in its fullness: Revelation's down-to-earth future vision of renewal and healing

The word *oikos* is not used in the Book of Revelation. Nevertheless, a sense of life in its fullness is very much present in the promise of a 'new heaven and new earth' (Rv 21:1) and offers the most earth-centred eschatological picture of the entire Bible, a counter-vision to Babylon or Rome. Contrary to the escapism or 'heavenism' of some interpretations today, the picture of Revelation promises God's future dwelling with people in a radiant, thriving cityscape located on a renewed earth. Heaven is not mentioned again after 21:2. Revelation describes not the destruction of the earth, but the earth's liberation from oppressors. The final vision of renewal, New Jerusalem, can help us envision how to undertake an exodus away from oppressive economic and ecological systems to a more just and sustainable economy in the household of all creation. Belief in a heavenly Jerusalem was widespread in biblical times (see Gl 4:26; Heb 12:22; 2 Bar 3:1; 5Q15). But what is so striking in the Book of Revelation – unlike any other Jewish apocalypse – is that this heavenly city descends from heaven *to earth*, as the famous hymn in the Protestant churches of South Africa goes (Gesang 602 [previously 177]).<sup>9</sup>

Dieter Hessel (2001:193) is rather outspoken in dealing with *paroikia* as meaning living away from home. The small and persecuted Christian groups began to see themselves as 'aliens and exiles' in a hostile world. The Christian communities cannot be 'a home away from home'. It is important to establish a healthy and just relation to habitat earth.

The entire Book of Revelation leads up to this wondrous vision of renewal and joy. Repetition of the word 'new' (21:1–2) underscores the distinction between God's renewed world and the Roman imperial world that has gone before. The first earth and the sea have 'passed away' (*apēlthan, ἀπῆλθαν*, 21:1), a reference to the earth as dominated by Roman imperial violence and exploitation. Whilst some scholars interpret the word 'new' (*kainos, καινός*, 21:1,2,5) as implying cosmic catastrophe and discontinuity of the new earth from the present earth, the point is probably (like 2 Pt 3:10) not that the whole cosmos will be annihilated and then replaced. Rather, it is the Roman imperial world and the world of sin that must be replaced.

The most pointed contrast between the political economies of Babylon and New Jerusalem is the declaration that 'the sea

<sup>9</sup>For the words in Afrikaans, see <https://www.webwoord.co.za/MediaFiles/g5177.txt>. The poet is I. L. De Villiers.

was no more' (21:1). Although this declaration may reflect biblical chaos, traditions associated with the sea, more likely it serves as part of the political critique of Rome, a perspective shared also by the *Sibylline Oracles* 5.447–49: 'In the last time, the sea will at some time be dry, and then ships will sail to Italy no longer' (Lester 2018:196). The Mediterranean Sea was the location of Rome's unjust trade, condemned in the cargo list of Revelation 18:12–13 as mentioned earlier.

God's river of life and green space fill out the final description of the city. Revelation 22:1–5 recreate the Garden of Eden in the centre of a thriving urban landscape, drawing on Ezekiel's vision of a river flowing out from the temple (Ezk 47:1–12). In Revelation, the river of life flows not from the temple but the throne of God and the Lamb, through the centre of the processional street of the city. Ezekiel's fruit trees on both banks become the wondrous 'tree of life', invoking paradise traditions. The fruit of the ever-bearing tree of life satisfies the hunger of all in need.

Most importantly, the tree's leaves provide healing. In contrast to the toxic sorcery 'pharmakeia' (φαρμακεία, 18:23) of Babylon, God's tree of life gives medicine – 'therapeia' (θεραπεία, 22:2) – for the world. Healing for the earth is an important apocalyptic theme also in *1 Enoch* ('Heal the earth, announce the healing of the earth', 1 En 10:7). The prophet Ezekiel described trees with leaves for healing; Revelation universalises Ezekiel's vision by adding the 'healing of the nations' to the tree's healing leaves (Rv 22:2; cf. Ezk 47:12). Revelation's medicinal leaves offer a vision of a political economy that heals the entire world. Healing comes not directly from God but through the creation, from a tree.

Revelation's focus on healing may be one of its most important contributions (Rossing 2016, 2017, 2020). In the face of projected impacts of climate change on human health, it is easy to despair. Regionally, some of the effects in Africa, according to the IPCC, will include diseases related to water stress, as well as increasing vector-borne illnesses as mosquitoes increase their range:

- By 2020, between 75 and 250 million people are projected to be exposed to increased water stress because of climate change.
- By 2020, in some countries, yields from rain-fed agriculture could be reduced by up to 50%. Agricultural production, including access to food, in many African countries, is projected to be severely compromised. This would further adversely affect food security and exacerbate malnutrition.

Recent research by the *Yale University Project for Climate Communication* suggests that people respond better to framing the climate crisis as a health crisis rather than an environmental or national security crisis. If we frame the climate crisis not so much as sin but as illness, for which God's will is healing, then the Bible gives us a narrative of hope. Healing stories are everywhere in scripture. But then

we must realise that an anthropocentric approach to earth is unacceptable (Bauckham 2011):

God's appreciation of the natural world and all its members as good bestows intrinsic value on his creatures. [...] As creatures of God the creatures are literally priceless, and we degrade them by setting a price on them. (pp. 231–232)

David Rhoads calls it by the name: 'We *are* nature' and we should not think of ourselves 'as living *on* Earth' but rather 'embedded *in* it' (eds. Buxton & Habel 2016:xi). Celia Deane-Drummond (2017: loc. 2217, loc. 2260) interprets Moltmann's view on the *imago Dei* (1985:90, 213–225, 263, 300–304) as not only humans but also the whole world. Klaus Nürnberger (2017) concurs:

There is indeed continuity between humans and other living beings, yet humans are far ahead of other creatures on an exponentially accelerating trajectory. Part of human consciousness is the capacity to envision the future. It can confine itself to what is possible and probable, or overshoot these limitations. (p. 1)

For ecological hermeneutics, chapters 21–22 are the most important vision of the book. Revelation suggests that our future dwelling with God will be on a radiant earth. Revelation's declaration of water given without cost, 'dorean' (δωρεάν), can be an important corrective to modern capitalist tendencies to commodify or 'fetishise' everything (Richard 1995:130), where even water must be bought and sold. The world's rivers of life and trees of life are not for sale (22:1–2).

## Conclusion: The climate *kairos* and ecomomy

We are all living in a world house. It is our home, it is our *oikos*. Economy, Ecology, Ecojustice, Ecumenism. 'The constructive and immanent thrust of ecomodical communities must incorporate the critical element of non-conformity' (Muller-Fahrenheit 1995:110). Five decades ago, Dr Martin Luther King (1986) already urged to act *now*:

We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. [...] Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: 'Too late'. (p. 243)

These words all come from the notion of *house*, and all are interrelated. Martin Luther King Jr used the expression 'the fierce urgency of now' above to refer to the civil rights movement of the 1960s – an expression that could also be used to frame the climate crisis as a civil rights crisis today. The urge to act *now* is being uttered around the globe: 'The favourable time is now!' was the United States of America's response to the *Kairos Palestine Document* too (Kairos USA 2009:3). Our biblical hermeneutics must engage seriously mounting evidence from science about the urgency of the present moment. Scientists now use the term 'irreversible' to warn of the consequences of inaction (IPCC Press Release 2014), which is therefore an eschatological term.

If ecomomy is eschatology put into practice, ecomomy can help us address the climate crisis. We can name our moment as a *kairos* moment, a moment of hope and urgency. And we can draw on the apocalyptic witness of scripture to address this crisis not with despair but with hope – hope for what the Gospel of John calls ‘abundant life’, hope for a renewal of the whole community of earth, the ecomomy and hope for ‘life in all its fullness’. Let us conclude with the appealing first paragraph of Pope Francis’s Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si’* (Francis 2015):

*Laudato si’, mi’ Signore* – ‘Praise be to you, my Lord’. In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs”. (p. 3)

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The Faculty subsequently published a scholarly book with the same title, edited by Dirk J. Human (2017), and several independent articles by the scholars of the Faculty. For details, look for the word ‘ecomomy’ at <https://library.aosis.co.za/index.php/misearch> (accessed on 14 February 2020).

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this research article.

## Authors’ contributions

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## Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.’

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## Data availability

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