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Creation Care in Genesis 1–2: An African Biblical-Ethical, Religious Perspectives

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Description
This article presents develops an African eco-theological reading of Genesis 1–2 by integrating biblical exegesis with ubuntu-based religious ethics to argue for human responsibility in caring for creation.

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Abstract

This article examines Genesis 1–2 through an African biblical-ethical lens, arguing that the creation narratives provide a theological foundation for ecological responsibility within African religious contexts. It contends that African ecological consciousness is deeply embedded in religious ethics, communal values, and the lived experience of interdependence between human beings, the natural world, and God as Creator. Using a contextual-critical method, the study engages Genesis 1–2 in dialogue with African socio-cultural anthropology, theological reflection, and environmental ethics. Particular attention is given to key ethical themes such as harmony, justice, personhood, stewardship, and ubuntu, understood as a relational vision of life summarized in the expression, "I am because you are." The article demonstrates that African religious worldviews offer important hermeneutical resources for reinterpreting the biblical doctrine of creation beyond exploitative anthropocentrism. It concludes that a constructive dialogue between Genesis 1–2 and African ethical traditions can contribute to a more contextually grounded eco-theology and encourage African religious communities to recover their vocation as responsible participants in the care of creation.

Keywords: *African; Biblical Consciousness; Creation; Environment; Religious Ethics*

INTRODUCTION

The ecological crisis has emerged as one of the most urgent global challenges, demanding interdisciplinary responses, including from the fields of theology and biblical studies. Within Christian theology, the doctrine of creation—particularly as articulated in Genesis 1–2—has increasingly been revisited to provide an ethical foundation for environmental responsibility, especially given that these texts have traditionally been interpreted in anthropocentric ways that legitimize human domination over nature. However, recent developments in ecological hermeneutics challenge such interpretations by emphasizing relationality, interdependence, and stewardship as central theological motifs.

In the African context, this reinterpretation of Scripture gains deeper significance, as it is supported by rich cosmological

and ethical frameworks embedded in African religious traditions. Concepts such as *ubuntu*, which emphasize interconnectedness and communal existence, offer valuable normative resources for rethinking the human–nature relationship beyond exploitative paradigms.

Accordingly, engaging Genesis 1–2 within an African ethical framework opens new possibilities for developing a contextual eco-theology that is both biblically grounded and culturally resonant. Within the Genesis 1–2 narrative and related texts, humans (*'adām*)—including Africans—are understood as ethical beings created by God, commissioned alongside other creatures on the sixth day of creation, and endowed with social, sexual, spiritual, and moral responsibility as bearers of the imago Dei (Gen 1:26–28). Inherently, human beings possess an ethical consciousness of right and wrong (Kanu, 2016, pp. 55–65), and in the African context, this consciousness is expressed in the understanding that, in relation to God's creation, good must be pursued and evil avoided. This ethical awareness derives not only from ancestral traditions and indigenous beliefs but ultimately from God as the source of all creation, both human and non-human.

Consequently, ecological and ethical awareness in African societies is deeply intertwined with religious life, as reflected in values such as harmonious human relationships, environmental and social justice, human dignity, and the preservation of ecological conditions that sustain life—including clean air, fertile soil, food, medicine, and climate stability. These values culminate in a principle of mutual interdependence with all beings, most distinctly expressed in the spirit of *ubuntu* as a communal way of life, encapsulated in the maxim, "I am because we are" (Ngomane, 2020; Udoekpo, 2021, pp. 10–28).

Recent scholarly works have significantly contributed to this discourse. Studies demonstrate that contemporary eco-theology increasingly emphasizes a mutually sustaining relationship between humans and creation, grounded in both biblical theology and ecological ethics (Otu, 2024). Similarly, African eco-theological approaches rooted in *ubuntu* highlight the intrinsic interconnectedness of all beings and advocate for a communitarian ecological ethic (K. J. Kavusa, 2022). Further research engaging Genesis 2 in dialogue with African-Bantu cosmology underscores the ontological parity between humans and non-human creatures as "living beings," thereby challenging hierarchical interpretations of creation (J. Kavusa, 2022). In addition, ecological hermeneutics has been increasingly shaped by contemporary concerns such as climate change, prompting reinterpretations of biblical texts toward ecological justice and responsibility (Osei Akoto, 2025). Complementing these perspectives, ecofeminist and contextual theological studies in Africa emphasize life-affirming relationships between humans and the Earth as a response to environmental degradation (Adedoyin et al., 2021), while recent empirical findings indicate an emerging "ecological turn" within African Christian communities in response to environmental crises (Stork & Öhlmann, 2025).

Despite these significant contributions, a critical research gap remains. Existing studies tend to address either biblical ecological interpretation or African ethical frameworks in isolation, with limited efforts to systematically integrate Genesis 1–2 with African religious ethics—particularly *ubuntu*—within a coherent and operational ecological hermeneutical

model. This fragmentation limits the potential for developing a holistic theological response that is both textually rigorous and contextually grounded.

Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach, which brings into dialogue the theological interpretation of Genesis 1–2 and African ethical consciousness within a unified conceptual framework. This study contributes to the advancement of global eco-theology by offering a contextualized African perspective that bridges biblical exegesis and lived ethical praxis. Ultimately, this research argues that a contextual reading of Genesis 1–2 in dialogue with African religious ethics can reconstruct human identity as an ethical agent responsible for sustaining creation in a holistic, relational, and sustainable manner

METHOD

In addition to what has been said, this article builds on past research, especially from scholars of post-colonial era and African socio-cultural anthropologists, theologians and philosophers, as well as, environmental ethicists. It contextually, exegetically and theologically engages in a critical dialogue with Genesis creation narrative of environmental care. It uses African biblical hermeneutical approach, its ethics, concerns, stories, customs, stories, life experiences beliefs and values. Its road map consists of four parts.

Part one, discusses African sense of religious ethics and interdependence on other creatures; human and non-humans, which are all encapsulated in the aforementioned harmonious phenomenon of ubuntu. It anticipates the argument or dialogue that biblical account and African religious ethics discourage abuses, exploitation, inordinate anthropocentric domination of bio-diversity and environment (Gen 1:26–28; 2:15). Part two, lays the ground-work for a detailed analysis of creation theology in Genesis 1:26–28, in part three. It does it by elaborating on the conversation and dialogue on the challenges facing African religious ethics of caring for the planet. This includes ethics of deforestation, persistent droughts, pollution, global warming, diminishing water supplies, declining productivity from agricultural pastoral lands, worsening food security, heightened levels of poverty and diseases, burning of bushes and over hunting which have endangered many animal species. Part four, reflects on biblical theology of creation in Genesis 1–2 and related texts (Pss. 8; 108:14–16; Job 7:17–18; Isa. 40:6–8). Among related texts, Psalm 8 in particular, delightfully addresses the universal question, "what is a human being?". It recalls humanity's honored status and human's responsible or ethical identity under God, saying; " Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet…"(vv5–6 NRSV). In spite of the above lingering ecological challenges, the study acknowledges some individuals, religious groups and communities in Africa who have made positive and ethical responses on ecology and demonstrate genuine ethical care of the environment.

To conclude, the study hopes to inspire contemporary ubuntu-conscious African and religious communities. It strongly reinvites all to reengage in a critical conversation between the Genesis account of creation and African religious communities. This will enable Africans to

rethink or reimagine their responsibilities as caring and ethical members of the community of God's creation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

African Religious Ethics- Ubuntu and Interdependence

This brings us to Joseph Kisoi Masika's article “Doing Ecology with African Creation Wisdom.” In this work Masika mentions among other things the challenge of lack of proper distinctive “ecological hermeneutics” terminology among African scholars to address the issues of the Bible, creation and ecology (Masika, 2012, p. 1). Citing Teresa Okure, Masika notes that as a matter of cultural rule, in doing theology and ethics, Africans do not start with issue of methodology. Rather, their primary “consciousness is not method, but life and life concerns, their own and those of their own” (Okure, 1993, p. 77). It is more about an Africans’ understanding of the human person and humanity’s dependence on God and other aspects of divine creation. In studies like this, questions regarding risking over-generalization or homogenization of Africa, her contexts and values are often legitimately raised. When that is the case, there could be no better response than that of Paddy Musana that, “the concept of the human person is encapsulated in the thoughts, and actions of the African peoples, thereby giving credence to human relationships, shaping and determining the relationships in ways that cherish and value life-supporting and positive transformative efforts in building human societies, irrespective of gender, race and religion”(Musana, 2018, p. 22).

Similarly, Anthony Kanu argues that, African community is made up of seven characteristics: common origin, world-view, language, shared culture, race, color common habits, historical origin and destiny (Kanu, 2016, p. 58). In addition to these characteristics, the relationship between the individual and the community and African person belongs, is expressed in many proverbs that extol the importance of a family. In other words, the personhood is expressed by the role individuals play in African communal setting (Kanu, 2021, p. 59). On this same note, Paddy Musana attests that, “the concept of the human person is encapsulated in the thoughts, and actions of the African peoples, thereby giving credence to human relationships, shaping and determining the relationships in ways that cherish and value life-supporting and positive transformative efforts in building human societies, irrespective of gender, race and religion” (Musana, 2018, p. 22).

In fact, earlier in his 1970 seminal work on *African Religions and Philosophy*, John S. Mbiti, prior to Masika, Kanu and Musana, addressed the concept of the human person in an African context. He said that, only in terms other persons does the individual fully become conscious of not only his duties, but privileges, rights, responsibilities regarding himself and other people. Mbiti, means to say that, when an individual in Africa suffers, he or she does not suffer alone. When he or she rejoices, he or she rejoices within the context of the community. Hence, " individual can only say: I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am. This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man" (Mbiti 1970, pp. 22–23). Mbiti’s definition of the human person in Africa draws on not only religion, but also the widely and continuously celebrated concept of *ubuntu* (Mbiti, 1999, p. 256).

Recently, this concept is well articulated in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's granddaughter Mungi, who argues that the concept of *ubuntu* is found in almost all African *Bantu* languages. It is rooted in the word "*bantu*," meaning "people," and often denotes the importance of community and connection, as acknowledged by Mbiti and others (Bujo, 2009, p. 281; Ela, 2009, pp. 6, 43; Mveng, 1979, p. 141; Ngolele, 2019, pp. 5–19; Ngomane, 2020, p. 14). Ngamane affirms that the communal richness of *ubuntu* is aptly expressed in both Xhosa and Zulu proverbs of southern Africa, "*umuntu, ngumuntu, ngabantu*," meaning "a person is a person through other person" (Ngomane, 2020, p. 14).

This concept must have inspired the political icon and freedom fighter Nelson Mandela, who gave everything to defend African personhood by fighting to free South African people from decades of apartheid, racism, segregation, and dehumanization. As is evident in his rich, lengthy autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, he identified with his suffering and oppressed people. He sacrificed a lot for them. He was not present at his mother's burial in 1968, nor was he present at the burial of his first son, Thembi, who died in a motor accident at the age of 25 in 1969 (Mandela, 1994, pp. 529–531).

Mandela's argument against apartheid and racism in the courtroom of Rivonia during his 1964 trial was remarkably characterized by *ubuntu* and self-sacrifice. In his closing arguments, Mandela summitted persuasively how he had sacrifice a lot and dedicated his entire life to the service of fellow Africans, even to the point of death (Mandela, 1994, p. 436). Mandela's display of *ubuntu* throughout his life, was unique in its extent. However, *ubuntu,* communal living, is indisputably a common experience throughout Africa. In Rwanda and Burundi, it means "human generosity." In certain parts of Kenya "*utu*" expresses that every action should be for the benefit of the community of creation. In certain parts of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, some villages bear the name "*utu edem usung*" or "*utu ikot edem udo*," which echoes a sense of community living. In Malawi, "*uMunthu*" conveys the idea that "on your own you are no better than wild animal, but two or more people make a community" (Ngomane, 2020, p. 14).

To add to this conversation, Kevin Vanhoozer opines that, "The human creature is neither an autonomous individual nor an anonymous unit that has been assimilated into some collectivity, but rather a particular person who achieves a concrete identity in relation to others. Human being is inherently social" (Vanhoozer, 1997, p. 158). In his "Environmental Ethics," David Gushee insists "that all human beings, including Africans are dependent not only on their fellow humans, but they also need a "healthy environment"(Gushee, 2010, pp. 250–251).

In other words, every human being (*'ādām*), irrespective of continent of origin, "need clean air to breathe, sufficient clean water to drink, fertile and healthy soil, land to till, healthy neighbor-creatures for clothing, food and medicine, reasonably stable climate systems, and temperature within a livable range" (Gushee, 2010, pp. 250–251). This is why Christophère Ngolele, an African sociocultural anthropologist, added his voice that, "An African, traditionally speaking, qualifies for full human identity only insofar as he or she lives in harmonious relationships with fellow human beings, the ancestors, created nature, and God" (Bujo, 2009;

Kamalu, 1998, p. 31; Magesa, 2013, p. 106; Ngolele, 2019, pp. 5–19; Tutu, 1999, p. 196). But unfortunately, this is not always the case in Africa, despite Africans' access to the Genesis account of creation, soon to be fully discussed, and its fundamental religious ethics of ontological existence of God; senses of the sacred, right and wrong and of harmony and intercedence on others, Africans are still being confronted with many ecological challenges.

Challenges Facing African Consciousness of Ethics of Planet Care

Africa, undoubtedly, is home to deforestation, persistent droughts, pollution, global warming, diminishing water supplies, and declining productivity from agricultural pastoral lands, worsening food security, heightened levels of poverty and diseases, burning of bushes, and over hunting, which has endangered many animal species. Unequivocally, "ecological crisis is the most urgent concern for Africans as they have come to identify themselves as victims of natural and human-made environmental calamities (Masika, 2012, pp. 1–2). In fact, I saw a life deer for the first time in my life in the United States of America because none existed in my native African village, perhaps all hunted out, inordinately for meals by superior human beings. This suggests that other biodiversity crises that are antithetical to both the Genesis account, and the above discussed African religious ethics, *ubuntu*, or harmonious and communal understanding of personhood in relation to other parts of creation, include, an unethical feeling of superiority, practice of perverse anthropocentrism, corruption, neglect of the poor, and the instrumentalist sense of disorderly abuse of the environment and other members of the community of creation including seas and trees (Udoekpo, 1994, pp. 7–28, 2017, pp. 118–120, 2020, pp. 1–6).

Pope Francis of Blessed memory, discussed such abuse in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* ("On Care of Our Common Home"). In relation to the human person (*'ādām*), Francis speaks in this document about the "crisis and effects of modern anthropocentricism," wherein human beings everywhere place themselves as the center of the world, abuse other parts of creation, and refuse to recognize their true ethical responsibility to protect the dignity of all (Pope Francis, 2015, p. No. 15). This has brought about humanitarian, ethical, cultural, spiritual and anthropological crises (Pope Francis, 2015, p. No. 119). The effects of anthropocentrism are; practical and cultural relativism, which includes extreme biological technologies that may use human embryos for experiments, thereby ignoring that "the inalienable worth of human being transcends his or her degree of development (Pope Francis, 2015, p. No. 130-136).

The exorbitant anthropocentric environment we live in today, especially in the continent of Africa, has exposed our broken humanity and identity. In Doug Moo's view "the pervasive anthropocentric understanding of the divine program of redemption needs to be revised (Block, 2010, p. 120; Moo, 2010, pp. 23–24). Many scholars, theologians, philosophers and environmental ethicist, including, Ngolele, Block, Douglas, Pope Francis, and others, agree that we need to review our understanding of the human person. Again, for Ngolele, "The distorted relationships with nature that we are witnessing call us to revisit our identity, since our identity is determined by the quality of our relationships (Ngolele, 2019, p. 5). We need to ask: What is a man (or human being)? *Che cosa è l'uomo?* Or, an African person? What are our

ethical and biblical responsibilities towards our environment. How should we read the creation story in Genesis against the background of our fundamental ethical consciousness? Outside of our gender, race, social status, and social responsibilities, what makes up our identity? I believe some answers could be found in the following exegetical and theological re-reading of Genesis 1:26–28 and related biblical texts (Ps. 8:1–10).

Creation Theology in Genesis 1:26-28 In Light of African Religious Ethics

In the text of Genesis 1:26-28 we read:

Table 1. Translation Genesis 1:26-28

Verse	Transliteration from MT	My English Adaptation
Genesis 1:26	וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ וְיִרְדּוּ בִּדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ׃	Then God said, “let us make human being in our own image, according to our likeness; And let them rule over the fish of the sea, and birds of the sky (heaven), and over the cattle and all the earth; and all the creeping things that creeps over the earth
Genesis 1:27	וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים׀ אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם׃	And God created mankind (human being) in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female, he created them,
Genesis 1:28	וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמִלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְכִבְשֻׁהָ וּרְדוּ בִּדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל־הָאָרֶץ׃	And God blessed them and God said to them be fruitful and multiply, And fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky And over everything that moves over the earth.

It is also appropriate to read this text in our African languages. In my own case, the text consciously reads thus in Efik Bible (The Bible Society of Nigeria, 1995):

> Ekem Abasi odoho, ete, Eyak nnyin inam owo isin ke mbiet nnyin, etie nto nnyin: yak mmo enung ekra iyak ke akamba mmong, ye inuen ke enyong, ye ufene, ye ofuri isong, ye kpukpuru mme andinyongni je enyonignide ke isong(v. 26). Ntem ke Abasi obot owo esin ke mbiet esiemo, ke mbiet Abasi ke obot enye; eren ye nwan ke obot mmo (v.27). Ndien Abasis odiong mmo, Abasi onyung odoho mmo ete, Mbufoe tot, enyung ewak, enyung eyoho ke isong, enyung ekan enye: enyung ekara iyak ke akamba mmong, ye inuen ke enyong, ye kpukpuru nkpo uwem eke enyonide ke isong(v.28).

Genesis 1:26–28 and related texts (Ps. 8), irrespective of the language, Hebrew, Greek, English or Efik, point not only to the anthropological constitution of human beings, but to human beings as special, responsible, social, sexual, moral, and spiritual creatures.

Anthropologically, within the context of the Genesis creation accounts (Gen 1–2), Genesis 1:26–28 points to the constitution, limitations, and potential of human beings (*ʹādām*). We see this in Genesis 1:26a, "Let us make man (*ʹādām*) in our own image," when read in connection with Genesis 2:7. Stressing the anthropological element of human beings, Genesis 2:7 says, "then the Lord God formed man (*ʹādām*) from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."

One of the several commentators on this text, Brian S. Rosner, believes that the "dust" (*ʻāphār, ntan isong)* from which we are made is a reminder of our connection with other things, such as trees, land, water, on earth. The "soul" (*nepheš*, *ukpong*) distinguishes us from other living creatures (Rosner, 2017, p. 66). Anthony Kanu in his African traditional Ethics, also gave a reminder, that, there is a harmony in the world between the physical and the spiritual and that the harmony of the universe is from Godd (Kanu, 2016, p. 57). The use of the word "dust" (*ʻāphār, ntan isong),* Rosner insists "emphasizes both our physical frailty and the fact that we come from the 'ground' and will return to 'dust'" (Rosner, 2017, p. 66). This is true, since the *Efik Bible* does not translate "dust" as "*ntong*" but as "*ntan-Isong*" ("soil from the ground").

The New Oxford Annotated Bible (Coogan & others, 2007) offers us a perspectival summary of the notion of "dust" in relation to the human being (*ʹādām*), when it says, " the wordplay on Heb "'*adam*" (human being; here translated "man" [cf. 1.26]) and "'*adamah*" (arable land/soil; here *ground*) introduces a motif characteristic of this tradition: the relation of humankind to the soil from which it was *formed*" (Coogan & others, 2007). That is to say, that, human nature is not just a duality of body and soul; rather God's *breath* animates the *dust* and it becomes a single *living being* (Ps 104.29; Job 34.14–15).

Kenneth Matthews, also speaks on the significance of humanity being made from dust. His words seem to cover other relevant biblical passages. In his observation, God is depicted as the potter who forms Israel (Isa 64:8; Jer 18: 6; cp. *Sir* 33:13; Rom 9:20). "Dust" as constitutive of human existence anticipates [Gen] 3:19, where the penalty for the man's sin is his return to "dust" (e.g., Job 34:15). While "dust" may also show that man is fragile physically (e.g., Job 10:8–9; Ps 103:14), the intent of the passage is the association of human life and the basic substance of our making(Matthew, 1996, p. 196). Moreover, a second play on the words "man" (*ʹādām*) and "ground" (*ʹădāmâ*) becomes apparent. Matthews, while appealing to Genesis 2:5, 15, insists that, man is related to the "ground" by his very constitution (3:19), making him perfectly suited for the task of working the "ground," which is required for cultivation (Matthew, 1996, p. 196).

Other than this wordplay on the words "man" (*ʹādām*) and "ground" (*ʹădāmâ*)—and its associate implication that man is related to the ground—this text also brings up the matter of the living soul or living being (*nepheš hāyyâ).* The Hebrew word *nepheš* (LXX *psychē*) is defined in *BDB* as "that which breathes, the breathing substance or being, the inner being of man" and is commonly translated by the words, "soul, living being, life, self or person" " (Rosner, 2017, p. 67). *Nepheš* in Genesis 2:7, as observed by Rosner, refers to the "whole person and not to some immaterial part of us" (Rosner, 2017, p. 67). In the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament, other terms such as "heart" (*kardia*), "spirit" (*pneuma*, *ruaḥ*), "liver," "kidneys,"

"bowels," "flesh" (*sarx*), "body" (*sōma*), and "mind" (*nous*) are also used in different contexts to refer to different aspects of human beings.

The biblical anthropological terms we have just reviewed shed light on the essence, limitation, potential, and meaning of the human person. Human beings, of all continents and cultures, are more than bodies. Human beings are more than flesh. Human beings are beings with a mind and heart, which are capable of the highest thoughts and deepest emotion. And as souls and spirits, human beings are alive and have the capacity to connect with the living God. Human beings are also special, in that, they are defined by relationship, as attested in the Genesis account and in the African religious ethics " (Rosner, 2017, p. 74).

Created in God's Image and Likeness (Genesis 1:26)

In Genesis 1:26a we read: "let us make human being in our own image, according to our likeness." This text, as well as other biblical texts, helps us understand better the meaning of the human person invited to care for God's other creation. In the past, scholars have offered various theological and philosophical speculations as to the meaning of "image" (*ṣelem*) and "likeness" (*dĕmût*) of God in this passage. A few texts in the initial chapters of Genesis offer some clues as to the meaning of the "image" (*ṣelem*) and "likeness" (*dĕmût*) of God.

A good example is Genesis 5:3, where we read that Adam's son Seth is "in his likeness, in his image" (NRSV). Read in a certain perspective and connection with Genesis 1:26, this text suggests that the divine likeness found in Adam, was continued in Adam's son Seth and was transmitted to the succeeding generation in spite of the fall. The passing on of the "image of God" is more explicit in Genesis 9:6, where we read, "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind" (NRSV). This text, like Genesis 1, is a reminder that human beings (*ʹādām*) male and female, including those with African origins and ethics, are special and unique. Other creatures—every moving thing—may be killed and eaten, but not humans, since their blood is sacred (Gen 9:3) and they have a special place with God, from whose image and likeness they were created (Moo, 2010, p. 74).

Many have observed that the terms "image" (*ṣelem*) and "likeness" (*dĕmût*) of God are used interchangeably or synonymously in Genesis 1:26 (Block, 2010, p. 127). It is argued that this may point to a bifold nature of human relationships. As the "likeness" of God, humans, including Africans, stand before him dependent and petitionary, while before the world they function as theophanies, imitating God in perpetuity and registering "his everlasting presence in the world" (Block, 2010, p. 127; Garr, 2003, pp. 118–132). As the "image" (*ṣelem*) of God, human beings stand before God as his vice regents, through whom he administers divine lordship and justice in the world (Block, 2010, pp. 127–128; Garr, 2003, pp. 135–165).

In other words, since he made human beings in his image, "God authorizes human beings to serve as his deputies, regents and his representatives, commissioning them to ethically care for the world as he would were he physically present" (Block, 2010, p. 128). Moo observes that Christians have usually read the plural that suddenly occurs in verse 26, "*naʿăʾśeh ʹādām bəṣalmēnû kidmûtēnû*" ("let *us* make human being in our own image and likeness"), as

"a signal of Trinitarianism, a hint of God's existence in three persons as Father, Sons, and Holy Spirit" (Moo, 2010, p. 74). The reading also "has some resonance with the common ancient Near Eastern conception of deity with his divine council, whom God may be considered to be addressing here" (Moo, 2010, p. 74). However, this plural expression could be looked at as the portrayal of a God whose life-giving Spirit (breath) is at work. His Word hints at, or foreshadows the later biblical theme of the Spirit, who gives life to God's people, and Christ, the Word through whom the universe came into being (Moo, 2010, p. 74). The singular pronouns return in the very next verse (Genesis 1:27, "*bəṣalmô bəṣelem ʿĕlōhîm bārāʾ*" ["in his own image, in the image of God he created them"]), suggesting that "whomever God is addressing in verse 26 is not outside of God (*ʿĕlōhîm*) himself (Moo, 2010, p. 75). Verse 26, also rings a bell in African ears who see and hear a universe governed by the spirit of harmony. As Kanu stresses, in African religious ethics, "the harmony of the universe is from God, who summons it into being, strengthens it, and preserves it" (Kanu, 2016, pp. 57–58).

He Created Them "Male and Female" (Genesis 1:27).

Another intriguing exegetical observation in Genesis 1:26–27 is that the plural pronoun appears here, and only here, at the creation of human beings (*ʾādām*). An additional observation is that "In Genesis 1 the creation of humanity is the longest section and the apex of the account. The important verb *bārāʾ*, 'create' is repeated three times (v. 27; cf. vv. 1, 21), and is the only instance when God blesses his creation" (Johnson, 2000, p. 564). In fact, it is only God who can *bārāʾ* ("create"). Uniquely, "male and female he created them" (*zākār ûnəqēbāh bārāʾ ʿōtôm*). Equally significant is the plural pronoun "them" (*ʿōtôm/ autous*) used in the end of verse 27, that says, "male and female he created *them* in his image."

According to Moo, this interpretation bears a sense of the "irreducible relationality of human beings made in God's image, created for community and intended to reflect in our relationships the unifying love that is at the center of the being of the triune God" (Moo, 2010, p. 75). We bear God's image not by virtue of wisdom, our reason, our stature, our strength, or even our capacity for moral judgment. We are invited, both from and outside Africa to recognize the universality of God's image in everybody, that is, all human beings (Moo, 2010, p. 75; Udoekpo, 2016, pp. 227–228; Uzukwu, 2015, pp. 202–204). In African religious ethics, the harmony and source of everything is viewed ontologically. Any action that is considered ontologically good is also regarded as ethically sound. For example, murder of any human being, male or female created in God's image is regarded in Africa as an offense against God (Kanu, 2016, p. 58).

Fill the Earth and Subdue it (Genesis 1:28)

God's purpose in creating human beings (*ʾādām*) in his own "image" is not only that they may "rule over other creatures" (Gen 1:26), and "subdue it" (*wəkibšûhā*, Gen 1:28). This is not to say that God did not give other creatures their own space. The sea creatures, for instance, are to "fill the waters in the seas" (Gen 1:22). Other creatures, like fish, birds, trees and land animals, also have their appropriate places to experience the shared and generous

blessings of God. But human beings are specifically given the unique role to subdue and rule the earth, land, and other creatures (Moo, 2010, p. 76). But what does subdue or rule the earth mean?

In Garr's view, the words "to subdue" (*kābaš*) and "to rule" or "to exercise dominion" (*rādâ*) are very strong words that may connote some type of "aggressive style of royal leadership" (Block, 2010, p. 128; Garr, 2003, pp. 132–165). Interestingly, the LXX translation of *"katakyrieuō*," Moo notes, is used in the Gospels and in other New Testament texts to refer to how followers of Christ are not meant to exercise exploitative leadership and dominion over one another (Matt 20:25–28; Mark 10:42–45; 1 Pet 5:3) (Moo, 2010, p. 76)..

There are other passages in the Old Testament where "land" or "earth" is the object of the subduing. These passages often relate to the conquest of the land of Canaan, "when the land is subdued (*wəhā'āreṣ nikbbašâ*) before the Lord" (Num 32:22, 29; Josh 18:1; 1 Chr 22:18). This indicates a link "between the creation and exodus/conquest stories in the Old Testament, which among other things, suggest that Israel's place on the land can be seen as a microcosm of humanity's place on earth" (Moo & Moo, 2018, p. 77). It captures the constant struggle and politicking undertaken to subdue and dominate others that humanity continues to witness today in different parts of the world. Block and other scholars would call this type of world "a fallen world." In a fallen world, leadership often turns into exploitation, as if those who are led exist for the sake of their leaders (Block, 2010, p. 128). Some leaders are even portrayed this way in the Old Testament, such as kings like Rehoboam (1 Kgs 12:6–15) or David (2 Sam 12:1–7), or the heads of the households like Abraham (Gen 12:10–20; 20:17). The biblical account, however, insists that leaders exist for the sake of the citizens and not the other way round (Block, 2010, p. 129).

Moo stresses further that our "*ʹādāmic* vocation"—the vocation of all human beings, whether male or female, young or old, black, brown, or white—is "to work and take care of the place where God has planted us, to serve him in our rule of creation as priests in the temple." (Moo & Moo, 2018, p. 78). Taking care of the earth and one another is central to human beings' identity as God's image. Importantly, the ruling and subduing called for in Genesis 1:28 must be done with reference to Genesis 2:15.

To subdue and rule the land and the earth ("*wəhā'āreṣ nikbbašâ*") as images of God means that human beings (*ʹādām*) all over the world, people of every status, kings and non-kings—including those in African countries—are to pattern their style of governing the world according to the model of the divine Shepherd in Psalm 23; Jeremiah 23; Ezekiel 34 John10:10 and related text (Udoekpo, 2013, pp. 561–563). In the broader context of Genesis 2 and the entire Genesis narrative, we find spelled out very clearly a better way of analyzing Genesis 1:28 or God's purpose of creating humankind (*ādām*). Genesis 2:15 reads: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (*wayyiqqâ ădōnay ʹĕlōhîm ʹeth- hā'ādām wayyaniḥēhû bəgan 'ēden lə'ābədāh ûləšāmərāh*).

Many have observed that the verbs '*ābad* ("to serve") and *šāmar* ("to keep, till, work, guard") have different meanings in different contexts and can even be used to describe different services Levites render in the tabernacle as recorded in Numbers 3:7; 8:26; 18:7 and

related texts (Beale, 2004, pp. 66–70; Block, 2010, p. 78; Walton, 2001, pp. 192–193). Block sees the priests and Levites' service in the tabernacle and temple, through which they maintained the covenant relationship between Israel and God, as "a microcosm of the world so that the man was charged to serve and guard the garden, thereby ensuring the operation of Yahweh's covenant with the world in general and living things in the garden in particular" (Block, 2010, p. 130). In fact, although many translations render '*ābad* as "till" or "cultivate," when used of cultivation, the object of the verb is usually "the ground" (*hā' ădāmâ*), as we read in Genesis 2:5; 3:23; 4:2; 2 Samuel 9:10; Zechariah 13:5; Proverbs 12:11; 28:19 and related passages ((Block, 2010, p. 130).

The verb *šāmar* sheds light on the meaning of Genesis 1:28 as well. Although it is usually used to refer to "keeping" God's commandments, according to Moo, in the Genesis account, "*šāmar"* equally refers to "keeping watch over," "guarding," "preserving," and protecting" people (of all races), animals, trees (of all kinds), or places of all cultures and regions ((Moo & Moo, 2018, p. 78). As the image (*ṣelem*) and likeness (*dĕmût*) of God, our care, our sense of unity and our love for and protection of the earth and one another "is thus a reflection of the care and protection that God shows to us" (Moo & Moo, 2018, p. 78).

Moo's sentiment regarding the identity of the human person in Genesis 1:26–28 is reflected in Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'.* In it, Francis points to humanity's failure to recognize that Genesis 1:28 does not encourage the exploitation of nature, the abuse of nature, or inordinate dominion over others. Francis calls for a proper contextual hermeneutic of faith that is sensitive to Genesis 2:15, as suggested earlier in this paper. He stresses and exhorts humanity (*ādām*) to till, cultivate, plough, keep, protect, preserve, and care for the planet. For him, these are all verbs of faith, which illuminate the mutual and responsible relationship between human beings (*ādām*), nature, mountains, streams, seas, trees and their neighbors (Pope Francis, 2015, p. nos 67-68; Udoekpo, 2018, pp. 91–93).

Africans' Positive Responses to Genesis Ecological Ethics

There are many African Religious Communities, Churches, individuals, publications and organization such as the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN), Association of African Earth-keeping Church (AAEC), the Baptist church Brackenhurst Environmental Program (BEP), and Symposium of Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) with proven record of promoting the care for the earth in the spirit of the above discussed Genesis theology and ecological ethics.

In 2020 the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria held her *Zoom Cloud Meeting Conference* from 3rd to 5th November on "The Bible on Human Beings, Race and Land." Although the conference was not primarily on ecology most of the conversation and paper contribution as captured in the Communiqué and in the proceedings of that conference touched on the importance of preserving the land and the human race. The earth and land, CABAN emphasized "belongs to God" Exod 19:5; Deut 10:14; Ps 24:1-2); who gives it to human being for their use…the land is for benefits of earth's creature, human created in God's image

and likeness have the mandate to take care of it as their "common home" (Okure & Ijezie, 2020).

Similarly, Masika has observed that "in an attempt to halt deforestation, desertification, and soil degradation, some African churches have adopted a reforestation/tree-planting Eucharist as a way of celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ" (Masika, p. 2). In the celebrations, an appeal is made to Matthew 28:18, which says, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." This text is understood by them (some African Earth-keeping Churches) as mandating Christian, the body of Christ, to build unity amongst themselves and the entire creation so as to "avoid destruction and preserve life for all creatures" ((Daneel, 1994, p. 250).. For members of this church, community tree planting Eucharist, is an attempt to integrate creation into the Body of Christ. In other words, for them, members of African Independent Church, the Body of Christ, as noted in Colossians 1:16–20 and related texts, embraces other creatures like trees, as well, for by him all things were created and in him all things hold together (Daneel, 1994, pp. 532–558).

Members of this church regard Christ, through his death and resurrection, as the real guardian of the land. This is a way members Africanize the sacrament. They identify deforestation, desertification, and other related abuse of the land, trees and other creatures with Christ's innocent trials, sufferings and death, as recorded in the Gospel passion narratives (Masika, 2012, pp. 3–4).

The African Independent Churches in Zimbabwe, in particular, have made a substantial contribution to the field of applied environmental ethics. Their contribution is expressed not primarily through the production of environmental literature, but through the proclamation of an expanded understanding of salvation that embraces the whole of creation. Moreover, their worship practices, including dance, embody a renewed spiritual rhythm that symbolically conveys hope for an earth that has been severely damaged. Although this emerging ethic has not been systematically formulated in written form, it is enacted through concrete practices, especially in efforts to "clothe the earth" (*Kufukidza nyika*) by planting new trees to restore landscapes degraded by human activity. In this way, they have introduced a new form of compassionate ministry and exemplify an ethic of stewardship toward the earth (Daneel, 1994, p. 248).

So also, is the Baptist mission of Kenya who, appealing to Romans 8:19-22 has come to wrestle with the ecological crisis of the rapid disappearance of indigenous trees and forests as an opportunity for them to develop a tree planting culture across Kenya; and to bring a Christian perspective to environmental concerns in East Africa (Masika, p. 4). In pursuit of their Christian perspective, the Baptist church started the Brackenhurst Environmental Program (BEP). In Masika's description, BEP's mission has been to pursue a God-centered response to the environmental crisis in Africa for the glory of God, advances the cause of Christ, and leads to a transformation of the people and the land that sustains them. Their mission is a form of Christ's–exalting ministry that motivates all kinds of mission agencies to embrace the crisis (Masika, 2012, pp. 5–7).

Additionally, in their 2019 *Pastoral Exhortation of the Symposium of Episcopal conference of Africa and Madagascar* (SECAM), the bishops took to heart the current ecological challenges facing Africa. They observed that "the ecological crisis is all about the relationship between humans and their natural environment" (SECAM, 2019, p. 98). Africans have resorted to exploiting nature for economic and selfish ends, forgetting that nature, like humans is a gift from God, the Creator and sovereign of all creation. Of course, African culture of communal living is consistent with our invitation to rethink the need to harmoniously co-exist with all God's creatures. The bishops advised the Church- Family of God in Africa to listen to the suffering voices of 'our sister, our mother Earth," since environmental ethic and justice. We must not keep silence over the questions of confiscation of lands, excessive exploitation of the lakes, rivers, gardens, pollution, deforestation and desertification and burning of bushes (SECAM, 2019, pp. 99–103)(SECAM, pp. 99–103). There are many other contributions of African scholars bearing on ecological crisis beyond the scope of this work.

CONCLUSION

In light of the above discussion, we have inexhaustibly analyzed and commented broadly on Genesis 1–2 and related texts that contain themes of God's gift of creation and humans, particularly Africans' invitation to ethically care for it. Genesis 1–2 discourages abuse, exploitation, inordinate anthropocentric and instrumentalist domination of nature-biodiversity and environment (1:26–28). While closely analyzing Genesis 1:26–28, in particular, the paper exhorts humanity (*'adām*), including all Africans to continue to harmoniously engage in planet care without inordinate dominion over other creatures (2:15). Although there are some Africans, as pointed out, who make effort towards this direction of responsible and ethical care for the planet, ironically, the current ecological challenges (deforestation, abuse of water resource, extinction of nature, persistent droughts, confiscation of lands, pollution of the air, and declining productivity of agricultural and pastoral lands) orchestrated by humans in Africa and beyond, proves some work still needs to be done. Enough care, as also found out in the study, has not been given to our sister and mother, the Earth.

Those acknowledged efforts of individuals, associations, churches, religious groups and communities, in Africa on the subject of ecology, with scriptural emphasize on the relationship between humans and their natural environment included: (a) the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN), (b)Association of African Earth-keeping Church (AAEC), (c) African Independent Churches(AIC) in Zimbabwe and Kenya, for instance, the Baptist Church's Brackenhurst Environmental Program (BEP), and (d) the work of the Symposium of Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), also known as the "Kampala Document."

The good news is that by engaging contextually in this way, particularly in the above mutual dialogue and reading of the Bible, of which Genesis creation account (Gen 1–2), forms a part, Africans are conscious of their religious ethics and responsibility in caring for their environment. They are also aware, as discussed, that with regards to God's planet, good is to be done and evil is to be avoided. The above discussed ethics is derived not just from their

ancestors, and divinities, but mostly and ultimately from the supreme being, the source of all creation, human and non –human alike. African biblical and ethical consciousness regarding ecology and biodiversity, are deeply intertwined with life and religions, as stressed through the paper. African people, as argued in the work place high premium on good values and customs. These values and customs promote, harmonious relationship with fellow human beings, environmental justice, social justice, personhood, healthy environment, preserving of clean air, fertile soil, food, medicine, stable climate system, respect for life, interdependence on other creatures. As a way forward, this contribution hopes to inspire contemporary ubuntu-conscious African and religious communities. It strongly reinvites researchers, scholars, and all to reengage in a critical conversation between the Genesis account of creation and African religious communities. Such conversation, researchers and dialogue, will enable Africans to rethink their responsibilities as caring and ethical members of the community of God's creation.

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