



# The Groaning of Creation (Romans 8:19-22) and the Ecological Devastation of the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

This work studied Romans 8:19-22 with a focus on the frustration human actions bring to the non-material creation which makes it yearn to be liberated from them and tries to see its relationship to the ecological devastation in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. Using the historical-critical method of exegesis and comparative and contextual methods it maintains that there is a relationship between the image of creation painted in Rom 8:19-22 and the ecological situation in the Niger Delta. It holds that since humans played a major role in rendering the non-material creation incapable of realising its natural goal, humans also have a role to play in its restoration. It further states that since humanity through the Christ event has been reconciled to God and looks forward to the realisation of the fullness of such reconciliation, reconciled humans should relate to the rest of creation in such a way that it will also experience the effect of this reconciliation as it awaits its fullness in future. The paper contributes to the discussion on environmental realised eschatology.

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## INTRODUCTION

Romans 8:19-22 has been a text of intense study right from the patristic and medieval periods and even more in the modern and contemporary times, though sometimes the areas of emphasis differ. This is because it is the only New Testament text that narrates the “story of creation.”<sup>1</sup> Patristic and medieval periods were more concerned with the meaning of *ktisis* (creation) whether it refers only to humans, human and non-human, or celestial bodies.<sup>2</sup> Modern and contemporary periods extended the scope to include not only the meaning of creation but also the referent of *hupotanzanta* (the one who subjects), and whether the text should be interpreted from the perspective of the present world ecological crisis or not.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary periods have witnessed an increase in the ecological understanding of the text and this has given it the designation “ecological mantra.”<sup>4</sup> While some cite the text often without proper exegesis as a biblical proof of human role in the present ecological

<sup>1</sup> Cheryl Hunt, David G Horrell, and Christopher Southgate, “An Environmental Mantra? Ecological Interest in Romans 8: 19–23 and a Modest Proposal for Its Narrative Interpretation,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 59, no. 2 (2008): 546–79.

<sup>2</sup> While Fathers of the Church like Irenaeus (Against Heresies 5.36), John Chrysostom (Homily on Romans 14), and Tertullian (Against Hermogenes 11) understood it in terms of creation which will be transformed at the end of time, while others like Origen (Principles 3.5.4), Ambrose (Ep. 34. 4-9) and Aquinas (ST Supp. III q. 91 a. 2 ad 6) as referring to celestial bodies

<sup>3</sup> This has to do with Rom. 8:19 on who subjects creation to futility, whether Adam through his sin, or elemental spirits as suggested by C.K. Barrett or God. C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Hendrickson, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Some of the contemporary works that understand the text from ecological perspective include: Scott C. Powell, *An Environmental Ethics for the End of the World: An Ecological Midrash on Romans 8:19–22* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019); Mark Bredlin, *The Ecology of the New Testament: Creation, Recreation and Environment* (Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing, 2010); Noah J Toly and Daniel I Block., *Keeping God’s Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2010); Hunt, Horrell, and Southgate, “An Environmental Mantra? Ecological Interest in Romans 8: 19–23 and a Modest Proposal for Its Narrative Interpretation”; Richard Bauckham, “The Story of the Earth According to Paul: Romans 8: 18–23,” *Review & Expositor* 108, no. 1 (2011): 91–97; Lauren J. Braaten, “Earth Community’s Lament for Liberation in Romans 8,” accessed January 12, 2024, [www.academia.edu/17613717/Earth\\_Community\\_Lament\\_for\\_Liberation\\_in\\_Romans\\_8](http://www.academia.edu/17613717/Earth_Community_Lament_for_Liberation_in_Romans_8).

crisis, some through exegesis either deny that the text has anything to do with the present ecological problems or blame the first human parents for their role in the present ecological problems. Others still through their analysis, limit themselves to the origin of the ecological problems and their ultimate resolution at the end of time. This work, taking notice of all these, argues that this text which is primarily eschatological has an ecological undertone which is not limited to the past and future but also to the present.

This work aims to undertake an exegetical study of Romans 8:19-22, taking into consideration its ecological undertone and see how it relates to the ecological degradation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. To accomplish this, this work employs an exegetical method of historical-critical analysis in the study of the text and comparative and contextual methods in the application of the text to the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The work is made up of three parts. The first, which is exegetical, is made up of the literary context of the text, the exegesis of the text and the theological synthesis; the second which is contextual has to do with the ecological situation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria while the third part which is comparative and synthetic has to do with the application of the text of Romans 8:19-22 to Nigerian context of the Niger Delta.

## **EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 8:19-22**

### **Literary Context of Romans 8:19-22**

Romans is one of the undisputed letters of St Paul,<sup>5</sup> written as a letter of introduction<sup>6</sup> to the Christians in Rome. Its purpose was to prepare their minds for his intended visit by giving them a summary of his major teachings or the gospel as he understood it and to give his advice on some of the major problems confronting the Christian community. Romans 8:19-22 falls within the wider context of Rom 5:1–8:39 which is seen as a section on the effects or benefits of the salvation brought by Jesus Christ to those justified by faith. It can also be understood as “love of God which assures salvation to those justified by faith,”<sup>7</sup> “the life which those that are righteous by faith are to live”<sup>8</sup> or “sure hope of salvation springing from righteousness by faith.”<sup>9</sup> St Paul in the first part of his doctrinal section (Romans 1:18-4:25) explains God’s chosen way of putting both the Jews and the Gentiles at right with himself while in this second part, he examines what righteousness brought by Christ entails for those justified by faith. For the Apostle, the benefits of this salvation include peace (shalom) which includes freedom from the slavery of sin, death and law, the gift of the Holy Spirit that makes those justified children of God with the hope of sharing in God’s glory.

Romans 5:1–8:39 deals with four major themes which are the benefits of salvation brought about by Jesus Christ: a life of peace and abundance of grace (5:1-21), liberation from sin and death (6:1-23), liberation from the law and its condemnation (7:1-25) and life characterised by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and destined for future glory (8:1-39). Romans 8:1-39 has three major parts: Christian life as that characterised by indwelling of the Holy Spirit and divine sonship (8:1-17), the future glory (8:18-30), and 8:31-39 on God’s love in Christ Jesus (8:31-39).

Romans 18:18-30 dwells on the future glory. St Paul having in Rom 8:1-17 shown that Christians through the gift of the Holy Spirit are children of God, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, in Rom 8:18-30 argues that as children of God, they have to share in the sufferings of Christ in order to share in his glory. He further maintains that suffering is not limited to humans as it extends to the entire creation which will also benefit from the future glory. Through this Paul shows that the salvation brought by Jesus Christ is not only anthropological but cosmic as it includes not only humans but the entire creation.

### **Analysis of Romans 8:19-22**

Romans 8:19-22 deals with the plight of creation, its origin and present condition and its future resolution. It is sandwiched between Rom 8:18 and 8:23 which deal with the same themes of suffering, glory and groaning but from the perspective of humans. Rom 8:19-22 dwells on three areas: the hope and expectation of creation, the suffering and future of creation and the groaning of creation as an expression of hope. The pericope may therefore be structured as follows:

<sup>5</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans, Introduction and Commentary on Romans I–VIII. The International Critical Commentary*, vol. 1 (London: T&T Clark, 1975), 2. According to Cranfield, the denial of Pauline authorship among some critics can now be relegated to a place among the curiosities of the NT scholarship.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation and Commentary. The Anchor Bible 33* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 79; Werner Georg Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Revised Edition (London: SCM Press, 1975), 312-313. These Scholars believe Paul wrote for a number of reasons which could be grouped into apologetic, missionary and pastoral. However, one of the major reasons for his letter is to give a brief account of the gospel he preaches in anticipation of his visit to Rome.

<sup>7</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans*, px.

<sup>8</sup> Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*. 253-254.

<sup>9</sup> Brendan Byrne, *Romans. Sacra Pagina 6* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 192.

- 19 - the hope/expectation of creation  
 20-21 - the suffering and future of creation  
 22 - the groaning of creation as an expression of hope

### ***The Hope and Anxious Expectation of Creation (verse 19)***

Three things that call for serious consideration in this verse are the meaning of creation, the nature of the expectation of creation and the meaning of the revelation of the sons of God. The meaning of creation (*ktisis*) in this verse has been the subject of debate and discussion since the patristic period. Various views on this can be categorised into five: (i) the entire creation including all humans; (ii) the entire creation except for believers; (iii) the non-human created world; (iv) the human world as a whole; and (v) the angelic world.<sup>10</sup> Many narrow the number to two: numbers ii and iii, but the expression “not only creation but we ourselves” in verse 23 seems to disqualify no. ii, therefore giving room only to no. iii. What is likely meant is the non-human world or creation as distinct from humanity.<sup>11</sup> The theme of this verse is the expectation of creation captured with two words: *apokaradokia* and *apekdechetai*. The first which is used figuratively is an expression depicting the behaviour of a person stretching his neck to see a coming event or thing and here means anxious expectation while the latter is from the verb *apekdechomai* which means to await eagerly. Taken literally, the verse means that the eager expectation of creation awaits eagerly for the revelation of the sons of God. Who are these sons of God and why is their revelation very important for non-human creation? St Paul has already explained who the sons of God are when in verse 14 he stated that as many as have the spirit of God are the sons of God. This is the Holy Spirit Christians received on account of the saving death of Jesus that made them children of God. Why then should creation await the revelation of the sons of God? Revelation of the sons of God refers to the full import of being sons of God or the destiny of Christians which will be made manifest at the parousia.<sup>12</sup> The non-human creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God because its destiny is tied to that of humanity in general and the sons of God in particular. Verses 20 and 21 throw more light on this.

### ***The Suffering and Future of Creation (verses 20-21)***

Having in verse 19 indicates the longing and eager expectation of creation, in verse 20 Paul explains the reason for this longing. Creation is in a deplorable state from which it wishes to be freed. It is subjected (*hupetagē*) to *mataiotēs* which can be rendered as frustration, emptiness, futility, or “the state of ineffectiveness of a thing which does not attain its goal or purpose.”<sup>13</sup> Four things need consideration in this verse. First, the relation of this verse to the preceding one, second, the idea of subjection, thirdly the meaning of *mataiotēs* and fourth the source of subjection. The relationship between this verse and the preceding one is indicated with the postpositive particle *gar* showing that this verse gives further explanation of the idea expressed in the preceding verse. It therefore explains why material creation is in eager expectation of the revelation of the sons of God. The condition or state to which material creation is subjected is referred to as *mataiotēs*. This term can mean emptiness, vanity, and frustration is used here in the sense of the state of ineffectiveness which makes something not attain its goal or purpose.<sup>14</sup> As most scholars agree, Paul is here alluding to the Genesis account of the cursing of the earth on account of the sin of Adam and Eve. Gen 3:17-16 reads: “Cursed is the ground because of you ... thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you” (NRSV). Even though the curse was directed to the earth or precisely to the ground, St Paul takes it as being directed to the entire material creation. Consequently, the material creation is rendered incapable of optimal production. This situation is contrary to its will (*ouk ekousa*) and therefore is an imposition on it. Who then subjects the creation to this state of frustration or to whom does the word *hupotazanta* refer? The preposition *dia* with accusative is used often to indicate causality (on account of) but in a few cases like in this verse, it is used to express agency (by).<sup>15</sup> Though one would have expected the referent to be Adam on account of whom the earth was cursed, the adverbial phrase, *eph’ elpidi* (in hope) makes it unlikely. Paul is talking of two things here: the one whose action is responsible for the

<sup>10</sup> Byrne, *Romans. Sacra Pagina* 6, 255.

<sup>11</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans* 506; Cranfield, *Romans*, 411-412; James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988): 469.

<sup>12</sup> Fitzmyer *Romans*, 507.

<sup>13</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 507; Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 413; Dunn, *Romans*, 470.

<sup>14</sup> P.W. Comfort, “Futility In ., Edited by (): 320-322.,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 322.

<sup>15</sup> F.W. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 226; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 508.

subjection of creation is Adam but the one who subjects creation in hope is God.<sup>16</sup> The phrase “in hope”, shows that the condition will not be permanent as a time will come to an end when the subjection will be lifted.

Verse 21 throws more light on *eph' elpidi* (in hope) and therefore deals with the hope and future of creation, its liberation from its present subjection to ineffectiveness. The conjunction *hoti* here means “because” and therefore introduces the reason why creation is subjected to hope. The reasons are presented in two stages: the liberation of creation from slavery (*douleia*) of decay unto the freedom of the glory of the children of God. *Douleia* can here be understood as slavery or bondage while *phthora* indicates the breakdown of organic matter and therefore dissolution or decay.<sup>17</sup> Creation will be set free not only from its inability to accomplish its purpose but also from disintegration and dissolution and be made to share in the freedom from decay which will be the future lot of the children of God.

### ***The Groaning of Creation as Expression of Hope (verse 22)***

Verse 22 deals with the groaning of creation. It is a bit surprising that Paul treats this theme after he has indicated the future of creation and how it will be liberated from slavery to decay. This verse has to be understood within the context of verses 19-21 on one hand and the three groanings in verses 22-27 on the other hand. St Paul presents what he is saying here as common knowledge (*oidamen*), though the scope is not clear whether he means himself together with Christians or himself with the Jews. The expression *pasa hē ktisis* (all creation) has the same meaning as it has in verse 19, i.e. material or subhuman creation. The two verbs *sustenazei* and *sunōdinei* are both compound verbs made of the preposition *sun* (with) and *stenazō* to groan and *ōdīnō* to labour at birth. When the verse is read in isolation, two interpretations are possible: either creation is groaning and labouring in pain of childbirth in union with humanity or it is doing so in union with its various members. Since Paul in verse 23 speaks of the groaning of humanity and since the groaning of material creation is to enjoy the future status of the children of God, it is better to interpret it to mean that the creation is groaning in unison rather than with humanity.

The verb *stenazō* either means to express oneself involuntarily in the face of undesirable circumstances, to sigh or groan, or to express discontent.<sup>18</sup> Here it is used in the first sense, while *ōdīnō* means to experience pain associated with childbirth.<sup>19</sup> Both verbs capture the pain and the groaning a woman experiences during childbirth. With these two verbs, Paul adequately captures the present mood of creation clearly articulated in verses 19-21. Creation is in pain because of the frustration humanity has brought upon it, the frustration of not being able to realise its expected goal. Though in pain, it has high expectations of being liberated from this present condition and therefore looks forward to it. Like a woman in labour, it suffers with the hope of bringing about a new reality, of being liberated from its present condition to that of the glorious freedom of the children of God, devoid of frustration and dissolution.

### **Theological Synthesis of Romans 8:19-22**

St Paul in this pericope considers the state of non-material creation from the perspectives of its present, past and future and its link with the condition of humans, especially the redeemed. In his view, the condition of non-material creation from the point of view of the present – the period between the death, resurrection and the second coming of Jesus Christ – is characterised by frustration, bondage to decay and eager longing for liberation from its present condition. Looking at the past of creation, he maintains that non-material creation suffers not on account of what it brought upon itself but what was brought upon it on account of human action. For the Apostle, creation has a future because it is subjected to hope and it yearns for the time when it will be liberated from its present condition.

The Old Testament on different occasions affirms that creation owes its existence and origin to God who brought everything into existence effortlessly through his word. Though some scholars have pointed out that the Genesis 1:1-2:4a account gives the impression that sometimes God creates through his word and sometimes by transforming the existing materials, it has been clarified that the argument on whether God created from material things or *ex nihilo* was an imposition of western mind as the primary concern of the priestly editors was to celebrate the omnipotence and magnificence of God.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> A good number of scholars like Comely, Cranfield, Dodd, Kasemann, Langrange, Lietxmann, Pesch, and Schlier) are of the view that it refers to God (Fitzmyer, Romans 508). However, there are those like Chysostom, Foerster, Lyonnet who maintain that it refers to Adam (Fitzmyer, 508).

<sup>17</sup> Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1054.

<sup>18</sup> Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 942

<sup>19</sup> Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1102.

<sup>20</sup> Walther. Eichrodt, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. J. A. Bake, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967).

One of the basic affirmations of the OT, especially Genesis 1-2 is that everything God created is good and humankind is the crown of creation. Proper understanding of the nature of the human relationship with the rest of creation has in recent times been a subject of dispute. The two creation accounts seem to assign two different roles to humans, that is to till and keep the earth (Gen 2:15) and to have dominion over the rest of creation (Gen 1:26, 28). Poor interpretation of these verses has made some writers accuse Christianity of sowing seeds of ecological devastation.<sup>21</sup> The verses need to be interpreted within their contexts. Dominion as has been pointed out does not mean domination but indicates how God the Creator relates to creation, a duty he also delegates to humans and since it has to be understood in terms of rule and governance, its meaning is not different from that indicated in Genesis 2:15 which is cultivation and care.<sup>22</sup> God gives humans the power to responsibly use the rest of creation. This entails appropriation of the fruits of creation and caring for creation.

According to Genesis 3-4, human sin radically altered not only the human relationship with God but also with the rest of creation. This also distorted his perception of creation. Because humans depend on non-material things for food and survival, the punishment of humans extends to the punishment of non-material things which was rendered incapable of yielding its normal output on account of the curse placed on it. As St Paul indicated, non-material things were made to share the lot of humans which includes bondage to decay.

God at an appropriate time intervened in the condition of humans through saving action in Christ (Christ event) that turned disobedient humans into children of God and restored the God-human strained relationship, bringing about the gift of the Holy Spirit and the hope of having the full benefits of sons of God. This raises the question of the fate of the rest of creation. As the New Testament, especially as Paul indicated, Christ's event is not limited to humans. Everything owes its existence to Christ and has its sustenance and end in him (John 1:3; Eph 1:10; Col 1:15-17). For the Apostle, the effect of Christ's event is cosmic; it includes the entire creation. The salvation of humans heightens hope for the liberation of material creation. However, just as humans are connected with the degradation of the non-material creation, humans are also connected with the liberation of non-material creation. For this, creation looks with eager longing for the revelation of the children of God which is instrumental to the liberation of non-material creation. This revelation is understood in the sense of full manifestation of what it means to be children of God which is believed to occur at the second coming of Christ. What cannot be denied is that Christians are already the children of God. They are already enjoying the benefits of children of God while awaiting its fullness at parousia. If Christians at present are enjoying the fruits of Christ event, it is proper that non-material creation should be made to share in this foretaste of the saving action of God. Though St Paul is not explicit on this, it can be inferred. Non-material creation enjoys the foretaste of what it will enjoy in the future when Christians relate to it as children of God. Pope Francis affirms this thus: "All creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things."<sup>23</sup> This entails relating to creation as God intended it which is to cultivate and care for it and to use it responsibly.

## THE ECOLOGICAL DEVASTATION IN THE NIGER DELTA

The Niger Delta, as the name indicates, is a delta where the River Niger and its tributaries flow into the Atlantic Ocean in the Gulf of Guinea on the west coast of Africa. It is located between longitude 5° E to 8° E and latitude 4° N to 6° N.<sup>24</sup> It has about 75,000 Km<sup>2</sup> comprising about 7.5% of Nigerian total land mass and it is situated within the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. It is a tropical rainforest and the largest mangrove forest in Africa.<sup>25</sup> It was at first identified as an entity by Sir Henry Willink's Commission of 1958 instituted by the then British government and was then limited to the present Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta States. It has over 40 ethnic groups with Ogonis, Degema, Brass, and Ijaws as the major groups.<sup>26</sup> Its major sources of income are fishing, farming, and petty trading. However, the Niger Delta region was later redefined and expanded partly

<sup>21</sup> Lynn White Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-7.

<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2015), 67.

<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, 83.

<sup>24</sup> S. Azaiki, *Inequities in Nigerian Politics* (Yenegoa: Treasure Communication Resources, 2003); Godson Rowland Ana, "Air Pollution in the Niger Delta Area: Scope, Challenges and Remedies," *The Impact of Air Pollution on Health, Economy, Environment and Agricultural Sources, InTech, Rijeka*, 2011, 181-98; D Asanebi, "A Concise View of Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: An Interpretation of a Nigerian Historian," *International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies*, 2016, 56-63, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Azaiki, *Inequities in Nigerian Politics*; Aniefiok E Ite et al., "Petroleum Exploration and Production: Past and Present Environmental Issues in the Nigeria's Niger Delta," *American Journal of Environmental Protection* 1, no. 4 (2013): 78-90; Asanebi, "A Concise View of Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: An Interpretation of a Nigerian Historian," 61

<sup>26</sup> Asanebi, "A Concise View of Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: An Interpretation of a Nigerian Historian," 60.

on account of more discovery of petroleum in other contiguous areas including the present Akwa Ibom, Abia, Cross Rivers, Imo and Ondo States.<sup>27</sup>

Niger Delta is rich in natural minerals, especially petroleum. Its petroleum deposit is estimated at 35.9 Billion Barrels while its gas is about 185 trillion cubic feet.<sup>28</sup> Petroleum which is mainly exported as crude oil accounts for about 90% of Nigeria's total revenue and its main source of foreign exchange earnings. It is equally endowed with economic trees like timber, raffia palm, palm tree, kola nut, and rubber while its major agricultural produce consists of cassava, maize, yam, etc.

Petroleum was first discovered in Nigeria in 1956 at Oloibiri in present Bayelsa State by the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and extraction started a few years later in the late 50's. Later, other multinational oil companies like Mobil, Chevron, Agip, Elf and Texaco joined. While oil exploration brings a lot of wealth to Nigeria, it brings ecological devastation and degradation, and economic impoverishment to the people of the Niger Delta. Its ecological devastation comes in three forms water pollution, through oil spillage, air pollution through gas flaring and industrial by products, and land pollution through oil spillage.

According to the European Union Council Directive (1996) on the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control, pollution is "the direct or indirect introduction as a result of human activity, of substance, vibrations, heat or noise into the air, water or land which may be harmful to human health or the quality of the environment."<sup>29</sup> The major pollutions in Niger Delta are air, water and land pollution. Air pollution may be described as the introduction of contaminants or pollutants into the atmosphere for a considerable length of time such that it is harmful to humans, animals, plants and other materials within the environment.<sup>30</sup> The major sources of air pollution in the Niger Delta are gas flaring, industrial emissions, and carbon emissions through burning. The Multinational Oil Companies are responsible for gas flaring and the greater part of industrial emissions. Nigeria is adjudged to have the highest record of natural gas flaring of about 19.79% globally and 46% in Africa and over 90% of these take place in the Niger Delta.<sup>31</sup> As of 2011, about 123 gas flaring sites are located in Niger Delta.<sup>32</sup> Other major causes of air pollution within the region are the emissions from industries especially multinational oil industries and activities of oil "bunkerers" who operate local refineries that emit oxides of carbon, nitrogen and sulphur into the air.<sup>33</sup>

Another major form of pollution in the Niger Delta is water pollution. Niger Delta has an abundance of water due to many rivers, streams, and ponds located within the area. This natural endowment which used to be a source of great wealth to the area has become a medium of hardship due to the insensitive activities of multinational oil companies, overzealous actions of the Nigerian Joint Task Force (JTF) on oil theft, and the greedy activities of some members of the host communities who engage in pipeline vandalism and oil theft. The multinational oil companies in their oil drill and other activities spill oil into the ocean (for offshore drilling), rivers, and streams which they hardly care to clean up. The area has a network of pipelines that sometimes leak and discharge into the river. The activities of the oil bunkerers worsen the situation through their breaking of the pipelines to steal oil and in the process, a large quantity of oil is discharged into the rivers and streams. The Nigerian JTF whose main assignment is to arrest and protect oil facilities very often contributes to water, oil, and land pollution through the destruction of illegal refineries, the destruction of the vessels and containers used in oil theft by discharging large quantities of oil into the rivers and streams.

Land pollution is equally a common phenomenon in this area. Multinational oil companies in the course of their drilling spill oil on the ground. Within Niger Delta, there is a network of oil pipelines that convey oil products to different depots. Sometimes, some of these pipelines leak either due to age or activities of oil thieves who break them to steal oil. Notorious on this are the oil bunkerers who locally refine the products and sell them. The Nigerian JTF contributes through the destruction of local refineries, and containers used to store both crude and refined oil thereby discharging the oil on the ground.

All these have grave impacts on the humans and environment. Gas flaring, industrial emissions, and the emissions from the local refineries have harmful effects on humans and the environment. They give rise to various forms of health problems like cancer, lung infections, environmental warming which contributes to

<sup>27</sup> Asanebi, "A Concise View of Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: An Interpretation of a Nigerian Historian," 60-61.

<sup>28</sup> M.A. Fagbeja et al., "Air Pollution and Management in the Niger Delta – Emerging Issues," in *WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment*, vol. 116 (WIT Press, 2008), 207–16, 209.

<sup>29</sup> Fagbeja et al., "Air Pollution and Management in the Niger Delta – Emerging Issues," 207-208.

<sup>30</sup> D.R.T. Ukpere et al., "Impacts of Air Pollution in the Niger Delta of Nigeria," *International Journal of Geography and Environmental Management* 4, no. 4 (2018): 13–21.

<sup>31</sup> Ana, "Air Pollution in the Niger Delta Area: Scope, Challenges and Remedies"; C.C. Tawari and J.F.N. Abowei, "Air Pollution in the Niger Delta Area of Nigeria," *International Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2012): 94–117; Central Bank of Nigeria Statistical Bulletin 15, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Ana "Air Pollution."

<sup>33</sup> Ana, "Air Pollution in the Niger Delta Area: Scope, Challenges and Remedies."

global warming, and acid rain that contaminates plants and leads to easy corrosion of zinc roofing sheets. Water pollution makes access to clean water more difficult, drastically reduces fishing activities, and leads to large-scale aquatic destruction. Land pollution adversely affects farming and agricultural products.

## **THE GROANING OF CREATION AND THE ECOLOGICAL DEVASTATION IN THE NIGER DELTA**

From the analysis of Romans 8:19-22 and the exposition of the ecological situation in the Niger Delta Region, it is clear that the text of Romans 8:19-22 to some extent reflects the situation of things in the Niger Delta. In this synthesis, three areas need consideration: the groaning of the creation or environment, the frustration and the yearning for liberation. Just as St Paul indicated in Romans 8:20, there is no doubt that the Niger Delta region is groaning on account of the multinational oil companies that devastate it through oil spills, gas flaring, and water pollution. It is equally groaning on account of the greediness of members of the host who break oil pipelines to steal oil thereby spilling oil on the ground, in the rivers and streams; on account of their illegal refineries that pollute the air with soot, half-burnt carbon and other harmful chemicals. The region is also in pain on account of the overzealous activities of the Nigerian Joint Task Force who in their effort to stop oil theft destroyed vessels used in stealing crude oil and those of the oil bunkerers and illegal refineries discharging the oil in the sea, rivers, stream and on land.

All these activities cause grave ecological damage to the environment of the Niger Delta, thereby hampering its productivity. Niger Delta is a region blessed with rich natural and mineral resources. Before the commencement of oil exploration in the region, the region is noted for its great yield of fish and agricultural produce. However, on account of the actions of the multinational oil companies, oil bunkerers and government task force, its fishing activities have been greatly affected because oil spills into the rivers and streams destroy aquatic life, kill many fish and drive others away. The rivers and streams that used to provide drinking water to the community and its animals are rendered incapable of providing their natural services on account of pollution. Oil spills on the land, in the rivers and in streams greatly affect agricultural production. Some portions of the land cannot be cultivated because of oil spills. As a result of gas flaring, and illegal refineries the rainwater becomes acidic water that affects the farm produce. It also destroys roofing material through corrosion. Rainwater also carries some spilled oil and distributes it on the farm thereby harming the farm produce.

There is no doubt that the Niger Delta region is yearning for liberation. It is eagerly looking forward to when it will regain its created natural state. It cannot do it on its own because it is not responsible for its present predicament. Only humans can restore it to its natural state. This is the responsibility of all Nigerians irrespective of religion or cultural affiliation as healthy human living depends on the responsible use of the environment. It behoves primarily on the Nigerian government, the multinational oil companies and the host communities to take necessary steps towards the restoration of the region.

As St Paul pointed out, creation was subjected to futility on account of the disobedience of humans that brought about strained relations not only with God but with the rest of creation, it is natural that now that humans have been reconciled to God through Christ, that the rest of creation should also be beneficiary of the new status. Christians live in the eschatological period which is between the redemption works of Christ and his Second Coming, at the period when though they are already children of God, they still look forward to the realisation of the fullness of that status or St Paul puts it, the revelation of the children of God. It is the same period that the rest of creation awaits with eager expectation. Since Christians are now in that period when they look forward to the fullness of their status as children of God, their lives and relation with the rest of creation should bear witness to that. As they are reaping the fruits of the saving actions of God, they should manifest that in their relationship not only with fellow humans but also in their relationship with the rest of creation. The major actors in the Niger Delta ecological devastation are predominantly Christians. As such they should allow their Christian understanding to affect the way they relate to the environmental situation in the Niger Delta. Nigeria as a member of COP (Conference of Parties that signed the UN Climate Agreement of 1992) should be faithful to the UN climate agreement and should make true its recent promises at COP28. Daka reports that: "At the last United Nations annual meeting on Climate in Dubai, popularly known as COP28, the Nigerian President, Bola Ahmed Tinubu promised that Nigeria will drastically reduce gas flaring and carbon emission and modernise Nigerian transportation through the introduction of electric buses."<sup>34</sup> The non-Christians among them should realise that as humans they must care for the environment. As Pope Francis clarified, creation is the common home of humanity that has the responsibility to care for it.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Terhemba Daka, "Tinunbu unveils bold vision for greener Nigeria at COP28" *The Guardian*, 03 December 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, 23.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Change of Attitude towards Environment*

There is a need for a change of mind on the part of those responsible for the devastation of the Niger Delta region: the government, the multinational oil companies, and the host communities especially those that involve in oil theft and illegal refineries. They should realise the great damage their actions cause to the environment and the host communities and therefore should take steps to address them. As humans, they should understand that caring for the environment is the duty of all humanity as human life and survival depend on it. As Christians (which the majority of them are), they should realise that creation is the handwork of God and its mindless exploitation is a dishonour to God. As Pope Francis pointed out, “When we can see God reflected in all that exists, our hearts are moved to praise the Lord for all his creatures.”<sup>36</sup> Christians should realise that creation and the creator are essential aspects of their faith. They should therefore conduct their activities in a manner that does not pose danger to the environment or the host communities.

### *Clean-Up Exercises*

The Nigerian government which is the primary beneficiary of the oil exploration in the Niger Delta region should, as a matter of urgency begin a comprehensive clean-up of oil spills in the Niger Delta region. It has in the past announced the commencement of such exercise without any tangible action being taken.

### *Minimizing Oil Spills*

The Nigerian government should give clear guidelines to all multinational oil companies in Nigeria on oil exploration and drilling in Nigeria. These guidelines should include heavy sanctions for spilling. There should also be an agency entrusted with supervising and monitoring the compliance of these guidelines. When there is an oil spill, those responsible should be made to not only pay the fine but also clean it up.

### *Cessation of Gas Flaring*

The Nigerian government should see to the immediate cessation of gas flaring in the country. The wasted gas which also creates an environmental hazard should be turned into domestic use.

### *Training Joint Task Force (JTF) on the Care of the Environment*

Those involved in checking oil theft should be properly trained in the care of the environment. From the way they presently operate, it is very clear that they are totally ignorant of the ecological implications of their actions. Whereas it is good to check oil theft, it should not be at the expense of the environment. The seized stolen oil should be sold rather than destroyed.

### *Encouraging and Regulating Modular Refineries*

Presently, Nigeria is importing all the refined petroleum products it needs as none of the country's refineries are working. Since some people can locally refine petroleum, what the government should do is not discourage such efforts by destroying their refineries, rather it should encourage them to establish modular refineries. The government should give clear guidelines on the building and operation of such refineries which should include some incentives like loans, and selling crude oil to them at cheaper rates. Through this, it will control the operations of illegal refineries and also reduce the importation of refined products.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to show the relationship between Romans 8:19-22 and the ecological situation in the Niger Delta region and to suggest the way forward. St Paul in Rom 8:19-22 painted a graphic picture of the deplorable condition of non-material creation which was rendered incapable of yielding its potential on account of human action. Consequently, it groans and looks expectantly to its liberation. This imagery to a reasonable extent reflects the environmental situation of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria which is a region endowed with minerals, natural resources and rich vegetation. However, irresponsible exploration of petroleum and natural gas by the Nigerian government and multinational oil companies and the greedy activities of some natives have turned the region into an ecological disaster incapable of catering for its inhabitants through its agricultural and aquatic products. This is a situation that should not be allowed to continue not only on account of its devastating effects on the environment but also on account of its adverse effects on the people of Niger Delta in particular and Nigeria in general as well as its economic implications. The Nigerian government as a signatory of the United Nations Agreement on Climate should be faithful to that agreement of preserving the environment

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<sup>36</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, 87.

through measures that will not only stop further devastation of the region but that which will bring about programmatic restoration of the region.

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