





## Re-Examining the Christian Ecological Models in Light of Eco-Theology and the Old Testament

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### ABSTRACT

One of the most global of all crises in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the ecological crisis. The causes identified for environmental destruction from the 1960s were hinged on human attitudes. The ecological models proposed afterwards did not adequately address the human. Thus, the problem still persists. The identification and understanding of the nature of the relationship that should exist between humans and the environment has been a bone of contention. Using the Qualitative Method, eco-theological themes and analysis and semantic analysis were employed in examining the ecological theories. One idea that sprang clearly from the study is the fact that humans and the earth are to be understood as relatives (kinsmen). This paper thus affirms and recommends the idea of kinship as a Christian ecological model that would effectively address human attitudes towards the environment.

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### INTRODUCTION

On the global plane, there seems to be a tension between human survival and the ecological crisis. James Barr identifies that there is a relationship between the ecological controversy and the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> Many scholars have over the last three centuries argued that religion ought to blame for the ecological crisis. For instance, Lynn White Jnr's thesis, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," is noted to be one of the academic writings that fingered Christianity and the Judeo-Christian traditions as the source of encouragement for modern science and technology to exploit the earth.<sup>2</sup> The heated debate that White Jnr's thesis sparked between non-Christian critics and environmentalists on one side and theologians on the other, led to the emergence of numerous Christian ecological models. Eco-theories, such as Environmental Stewardship, Neighbourship, Caretakership, Biocentrism, Theocentrism and Pantheism are re-examined in this paper because even though all the causes identified for environmental destruction were hinged on human attitudes, one would observe that these ecological models proposed, do not adequately address the human, and thus, the problem still persists.

<sup>1</sup> James Barr, "Man and Nature: The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament," in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Volumn 55, Issue 1 (1972): 9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7227/BJRL.55.1.2>

<sup>2</sup> Lynn White Jnr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, 155, (March, 1967): 1207

The paper seeks to identify and attempts to establish an understanding of the nature of the relationship that should exist between humans and the environment. It explores the nexus between humans and the earth in the context of eco-theology and the Old Testament (OT) from a Christian viewpoint. This is crucial because human's relationship with the earth as far as the OT is concerned has been viewed from different perspectives by scholars. Many approach it from a human perspective. Some look at it from the angle of the earth. Still, others prefer considering this relationship in an ecosystemic manner (holistically). These varied scholarly approaches to human-earth/land relations are what have resulted in ecological models that stem from Christian circles, termed in this paper as Christian Ecological Models (CEMs). The paper employs a qualitative method. The CEMs are analysed thematically by identifying the main proponents, the principal argument and the gaps. The key verbs in the selected OT eco-theological text (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:7, 15) are discussed contextually with the help of semantic analysis. This is done because one would agree that authors' intent and meanings are usually embedded in the words they use. As a result, analyzing the words of a given text is to a large extent, key to unravelling the meaning of that text.

### Eco-Theory

Ecology has become a topic of major general interest in recent years, due to the global concern for environmental destruction, culminating in global warming and climate change. "It is not surprising, then, that a lot of work has been done on various aspects of ecological spirituality."<sup>3</sup> It has been noted by some scholars that prior to the 1970s, Christian theological scholarship did not feature ecological issues.<sup>4</sup> Some others asserted that the environment and the non-human entities were of no or little value, thus the Bible paid no attention to it.<sup>5</sup> This view persisted until Lynn White Jr., in his famous thesis, accused Christianity of anthropocentric faith and the Bible as the cause for the ecological crisis championed by Western scientific and technological evolution.<sup>6</sup>

In their attempt to refute the criticisms and or defend the Bible and the Christian faith, several theologians and biblicists, having analysed White's criticisms, examined the Bible and produced numerous articles and books on the theme of biblical ecology. Some, such as Barr,<sup>7</sup> Bauckham,<sup>8</sup> Conradie,<sup>9</sup> Nash,<sup>10</sup> Passmore,<sup>11</sup> and Schaeffer,<sup>12</sup> ended up propounding eco-theories and proposing biblical and or Christian concepts that would adequately describe the interconnectedness between humans and the natural environment.<sup>13</sup> The biblical concept of "dominion," eco-theology, biocentrism, eco-hermeneutics, stewardship of the earth, theocentrism, theoconservatism, eco-balance, etcetera. are examples of their propositions, which have been featured in several academic works, are worth examining. This paper re-examines some of these ecological models from a Christian perspective.

### Stewardship Model

From the perspective of humans, Asante advocates the stewardship model. According to him, the Genesis narratives relate that humans have ultimate responsibility for the earth to God and the Creator. This implies that humans are the stewards of the created order.<sup>14</sup> Stewardship of the created order

<sup>3</sup> Donal Dor, "The Eco-Theological Issues," *The Furrow*, Vol. 61, No. 5, (May 2010): 311.

<sup>4</sup> Peet Van Dyk, "Challenges for Ecotheology" *OPE*, 22/1, (2009): 189.

<sup>5</sup> Van Dyk, "Challenges for Ecotheology," 195.

<sup>6</sup> White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," 1207.

<sup>7</sup> Barr, "Man and Nature: "The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament," 10.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, (London DLT, 2010)

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Conradie, *Christianity and Earthkeeping: In Search of an Inspiring Vision*, (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Roderick Nash, "Ecological Integrity and Christian Political Responsibility," *Theology and Public Policy*, (1989): 91.

<sup>11</sup> John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, (London: Duckworth, 1980), 12.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: A Christian View of Ecology*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Wes Jackson, *Man and the Environment*, (Dubuque, Iowa: WM. C. Company Publishers, 1971), 19.

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Asante, "Ecological Crisis: A Christian Answer," *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (December/January, 1994-95): 15.

should be characterized by care, preservation, conservation and protection.<sup>15</sup> This enjoins humans, not to desecrate and abuse the earth because taking care of the earth is a human responsibility, given to him by God. This model indicates that the fate of nature depends directly upon the actions and inactions of humans. This stands to reason that human stewardship could be assessed on the basis of whether or not he cares for, preserves, conserves, protects and seeks the well-being of the earth.

This explains the reasons why the OT contains serious warnings against land and environmental abuse.<sup>16</sup> Thus in the stewardship model, humans are pictured either as the foolish lords of the earth with the power to destroy nature, or humans are benevolent lords with the power to save and preserve nature.<sup>17</sup> The concern for the quality of the environment is a legitimate expression of Christian spirituality.<sup>18</sup> One cannot agree more with Asante that the failure of humans to find a solution to the ecological crisis will lead to the death of natural resources and consequently to humanity's death.<sup>19</sup>

Stewardship perfectly describes humankind's role and the relationship of responsibility to creation. Hall posits that stewardship is a combination of both the relationship of humans with God and with creation.<sup>20</sup> The term, "steward," could therefore be the model metaphor that corrects the devastation caused by humankind.<sup>21</sup> "The human being is, as God's steward, accountable to God and responsible for his fellow creatures."<sup>22</sup> In the OT, a steward was a person in charge of a household (Gen. 43:19; 44:4; Is. 22; 15, etc.). In the New Testament (NT) two words translate the word, steward; *epitropos*, (Mt. 20:8; Gal. 4:2), which means a custodian and this stands for the role mankind plays in the world. The other word is *oikonomos* (Lk. 16:2-3; 1 Cor. 4:1-2; Tit. 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:10), which describes a manager. This is taken from *oikos*, "a house" and *nemo* "dispense." All things belong to Christ and Christians are His stewards, responsible for managing the earth on behalf of God (Eph. 3:2; 1 Cor. 9:17; Col. 1:25). It can also be understood that God created the earth and gave everything within it to humans to take custody of. The end result of responsible stewardship towards the environment is the display of the right attitudes in environmental care. Hall asserts that Christians have been called to take care of creation and this includes showing respect to God's creation. This is to ensure that harmony and unity exist between humans and creation.<sup>23</sup> Environmental care is the mandate to protect and conserve the environment. This includes abstaining from the abuse of natural reserves. Mankind, therefore, needs to develop a sense of responsibility to preserve the reserves put into his care.

Another scope of responsible stewardship is portraying a responsible lifestyle. Materialism and greed have caused much destruction to nature. Mankind has been called to cater for the environment and not to exploit it. The personal effort often culminates in national consensus. Laws and regulations are then put in place which puts all checks in place. This is because major corporations are often sighted for the gross abuse of natural reserves. Responsible stewardship also calls for the respect of all human rights and privileges which include creation. There have been recent calls for mankind to be responsible towards the generations yet to come. The current ecological crisis has caused most nations to recognise the need to protect nature for posterity. The spate of environmental degradation is a cause for concern. One wonders what the future holds.

Mankind also has the responsibility to honour God for giving the opportunity to cater for creation. Humans need to come to terms with the fact that God is the "one who endows morality, excellence, and accountability with regards to humans and in principle, humans' interconnectedness

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<sup>15</sup> Asante, "Ecological Crisis: A Christian Answer," 15.

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Twumasi-Ankrah, "Yahweh, Israel and the Neighbouring Nations," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (2017): 138. See also for e.g. Lev. 25:23; Num. 35:33-34; Deut. 23:12-14.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Peterson, "Naming a Theology of Land", *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (December/January, 1994-95): 21.

<sup>18</sup> Asante, "Ecological Crisis," 18.

<sup>19</sup> Asante, "Ecological Crisis."

<sup>20</sup> John Douglas Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1990), 26

<sup>21</sup> Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Hall, *The Steward*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Hall, *The Steward*, 27.

with God would be evident in an accountable relationship with the non-human world.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, humans who are fundamentally not better than the rest of nature or biologically not different from the earth specifically, are to consider their role in creation from a theological perspective.

According to Berry, the stewardship model is a perfect framework for humans to tackle the current ecological challenges that the world is facing.<sup>25</sup> He however posits that there are certain limitations in its possible implementation.<sup>26</sup> He states that “It can be very dangerous to overestimate one's power to achieve or control things and the fact that there is also a lack of focus.”<sup>27</sup> Bauckham on the other hand firmly rejects the view that humans are “co-creators or co-redeemers” with God on the basis that such views “pander to the hubristic modern aspiration to the role of gods over the world.”<sup>28</sup> Bauckham also disagrees with the common view by orthodox traditions “that humans are priests of creation.”<sup>29</sup> He goes on to argue that this view “is a relic of some of the more grossly anthropocentric views of the creation in Christian history and has no support from the Bible, where other creatures have their own direct relationships with God (Gen. 9:10, 16; Job 38-39; Ps. 50:4; Ps. 104:21, 27-28; Is. 45:8; Joel 1:20; Mat. 6:26; Rev.5:13).”<sup>30</sup> That is to say human is only a priest over himself but not over non-human creation.

The view that humans are set over creation, not within it, is strongly refuted by Bauckham that human creatureliness is more fundamental than his distinctiveness. To him, “humans need the humility to know themselves as creatures within creation, not gods over creation, the humility of knowing that only God is God,”<sup>31</sup> a point made unequivocally in Job 38-41. Bauckham is keen on the notion of a “community of creation,” within which there are “special and distinctive roles,”<sup>32</sup> clearly expressed in Psalm 104 where “its picture of an ecological creation belongs within its theocentric praise of God for his creation,”<sup>33</sup> a passage responded to in Psalm 148 and drawn upon by Jesus in Matthew 6:25-33. He quotes with approval, the American Wendell Berry, who developed this concept.<sup>34</sup> In his poem, “Providence,” Herbert, pictures the creatures “as unable to put their praise into words and so requiring humans to present the sacrifice for all.” Bauckham expands his criticism of Herbert's theology, where he calls the Orthodox assumption that “only through human mediation can the rest of creation by itself in relation to God an arrogant assumption [of which] there is not a trace in the Scriptures.”<sup>35</sup> This Orthodox sacerdotal universe is not the world of the OT where the creatures have their own relationships with God quite apart from humanity and fulfil their God-given existence without human interference (e.g. Ps. 104; Job 38-39) (152).<sup>36</sup> Bauckham in this is supporting Christopher Wright's “triangle model”<sup>37</sup> which depicts an interrelationship existing among God, humans and the universe.

However, there are limitations to the principle of stewardship. Human beings may not possess the intelligence or know-how to be stewards of anything on the scale of the earth. Clare Palmer writes: “To be a successful steward ... it is necessary to understand that which is being controlled. But the natural world is not like an estate, nor like money in this respect. It is composed of complex ecosystems

<sup>24</sup> Ken Gnanakan, “Creation, Christians and Environmental Stewardship,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol. 30, Issue 2, (2006): 133-134.

<sup>25</sup> R. J. Berry, “Beyond Stewardship: the Bible and the Community of Creation,” *Science & Christian Belief*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2012): 180.

<sup>26</sup> Berry, “Beyond Stewardship: the Bible and the Community of Creation,” 180.

<sup>27</sup> Berry, “Beyond Stewardship: the Bible and the Community of Creation,” 180.

<sup>28</sup> Bauckham, “Bible and Ecology,” cited in R. J. Berry, *Beyond Stewardship*, 180.

<sup>29</sup> Bauckham, “Bible and Ecology,” cited in R. J. Berry, *Beyond Stewardship*, 180.

<sup>30</sup> Bauckham, “Bible and Ecology,” 39.

<sup>31</sup> Bauckham, “Bible and Ecology,” 46.

<sup>32</sup> Bauckham, “Bible and Ecology,” 64.

<sup>33</sup> Bauckham, “Bible and Ecology,” 70.

<sup>34</sup> J. Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia*, (London: Allen Lane, 2006); S.J. Gould, “The Golden Rule - a proper scale for our environmental values,” in *Eight Little Piggies*, 41-51, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), 38.

<sup>35</sup> Bauckham, “Bible and Ecology,” 39.

<sup>36</sup> Bauckham, “Bible and Ecology,” 39.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 26. Berry, “Beyond Stewardship,” *Science & Christian Belief*, 180.

that humans do not understand and cannot predict.”<sup>38</sup> James Lovelock describes the stewardship concept as “sheer hubris.”<sup>39</sup> He claims, “Humans are no more qualified to be stewards or developers of the Earth than are goats to be gardeners.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, the meaning of stewardship in human-earth relations in practical terms needs to be reconsidered. One would wonder whether or not humans are expected to tidy up and “improve” the earth, or stand aloof and let the earth be. In Bauckham’s view, it presupposes a vertical, hierarchical relationship in which God is in charge of humans, who in turn are in charge of the rest of creation.<sup>41</sup> Bauckham “encourages human beings to look again at the accounts in Genesis: human beings are first and foremost part of creation.<sup>42</sup> The human being (*’ādām*) is formed from the dust of the soil *adamah* (Gen. 2:7), and the call to exercise dominion *radah* (Gen. 1:28), is within strictly controlled limits since the living creatures have their prior call to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”<sup>43</sup>

Thus, human beings are not so much of stewards, instead, they are a part of, and interdependent with, the rest of creation –an idea stressed in the Noahic covenant which is not made with only human beings, but also with animals (Gen. 9:9-10). The idea of dominion granted to human beings does not in any way position them above the non-human creation but rather bestows unto them a definite delegated responsibility within it. The same point is succinctly highlighted by Barker in looking at the Poetic literature and the Psalms, which relate that creation itself worships and adores God (Psalm 148, Isa 42:10).<sup>44</sup> Thus, a proper biblical eco-theology will not take into consideration a mere idea of stewardship, but that the created world has “supreme worth for God, and that violation of the earth amounts to an affront to God’s holiness.”<sup>45</sup>

### Caretakership Model

Some other scholars prefer referring to the ideas proposed by proponents of the stewardship model as “caretakership,” whereby the language of dominion and subduing as found in the Genesis narratives has been squeezed and reshaped into more acceptable and less harsh language.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, this idea of stewardship and or caretakership seems to fall short of what the creation narratives in the book of Genesis teach. The stewardship/caretakership idea suggests that nature is one step removed from humanity.<sup>47</sup> That is, humans are considered superior to nature. One could assume that this view if pressed too far, may not have the needed grounding because “it insulates humans from who they are and what their place in creation is supposed to be.”<sup>48</sup> This model would position humans outside of creation and may only be effective when there is strict supervision over the activities of humans. A caretaker may care less, may not be loyal, may pursue personal interests to survive and may not risk his life when threatened because he has little to lose eventually.

All of this implies that humans are not in a position to either destroy or save the earth because the earth is not a vulnerable subject under them; to it, they are at liberty to do what pleases them. This corroborates Palmer’s view that humans do not even have an accurate and adequate understanding of the environment let alone possessing the ability to control and take charge of it.<sup>49</sup> On many occasions,

<sup>38</sup> Clare Palmer, “Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Stewardship*, (2006):72.

<sup>39</sup> James Lovelock, ‘The Fallible Concept of Stewardship of the Earth’, in R.J. Berry (ed.), *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 108.

<sup>40</sup> Lovelock, “The Fallible Concept of Stewardship of the Earth,” 108.

<sup>41</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 16-35.

<sup>42</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 16-35.

<sup>43</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 16-35.

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Barker, *Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment*, (London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2010)

<sup>45</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco Theology*, (London: DLT 2008), 89.

<sup>46</sup> Peterson, “Naming a Theology of Land,” 21-21. According to the idea of “Caretakership” the call to stewardship includes responsibility for the health of creation. In the 1990s, the Americans Green Stewardship programme that required examination of personal lifestyle for its impact on the environment was vitally important for the transformation that took place in the nation.

<sup>47</sup> Peterson, “Naming a Theology of Land,” 21.

<sup>48</sup> Peterson, “Naming a Theology of Land.”

<sup>49</sup> Palmer, “Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics,” 72.

humans rather look helplessly vulnerable in case of landslides, earthquakes, tsunamis, flooding, hurricanes, pandemics etcetera but not caretakers or stewards.

### Neighbourship Model

Another proposed ecological model one may call “Neighbourship,” –an understanding of human-earth/land relationship that identifies the position of humans with regards to the rest of nature as a neighbour instead of a steward or caretaker.<sup>50</sup> According to Peterson, this “theology of neighbour” should be the theological understanding that should inform and guide the human relationship with creation.<sup>51</sup> The whole idea of neighbourship stems from the premise that humans are on Earth. The fact cannot be disputed that both biologically<sup>52</sup> and biblically,<sup>53</sup> humans are indeed made from the earth and are justifiably termed earthlings.<sup>54</sup> The earth is not a product of human but instead, human is earth. It was the dust of the ground that was used to form humans (Gen. 2:7). This suggests that human is a product of the earth but not the other way round. Human is tied both physically and spiritually to the living processes of creation.<sup>55</sup> Both humans and earth are creatures of God, permitted to co-habit within the ecosystem for mutual support and to establish the image of God in the world. This idea of neighbourship relates that humans and earth are part of the same covenant community and thus, human actions toward the earth should reflect the ethic of communal prosperity.<sup>56</sup> This is because the mood and well-being of humans are connected to the environmental surroundings.<sup>57</sup>

### Biocentrism

This is a cosmological theory proposed by Robert Lanza, an American scientist. He describes Biocentrism as an ethical standpoint that posits that all non-human life possesses inherent value notwithstanding the quality of its consciousness.<sup>58</sup> In this view, “life and biology are central to being, reality, and the cosmos –life creates the universe rather than the other way round.”<sup>59</sup> It revolves around a way of subjective experience, called consciousness, a physical process.<sup>60</sup>

Biocentrism relates that there is equal value in all life’s processes such as human life, animal life, the natural environment, and the entire creation and thus, need to be valued for what they are.<sup>61</sup> Conservative societies gravitate towards biocentric tendencies, where their day-to-day activities show clearly how closely they relate to their physical environment. “The Earth’s ecosystem is to be valued for its own sake and not for mere human benefit.”<sup>62</sup> Several environmentalists strongly advocate for humankind to acknowledge that the natural environment itself is endowed with an inherent value.

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<sup>50</sup> Neighbourship is an idea concerning man-land relationship that suggests that humans are neighbours with the earth/land. This view points out the limitations inherent in the stewardship or caretakership model and refutes the assertion that man is the master (steward) of the earth.

<sup>51</sup> Peterson, “Naming a Theology of Land,”

<sup>52</sup> The biological composition of humans is a combination of water, organic compounds and trace elements. Implying that humans are a highly organized mud.

<sup>53</sup> Biblically, God formed humankind (‘*ādām*) from the ground (‘*ādāmāh*). The Hebrew word, ‘*ādām*’ ‘human’ is closely related to ‘*ādāmāh*, the ‘ground’ (Gen. 2:7).

<sup>54</sup> Gnanakan, “Creation,” 128.

<sup>55</sup> Peterson, “Naming a Theology of Land,” 22.

<sup>56</sup> Peterson, “Naming a Theology of Land,” 23.

<sup>57</sup> Peterson, “Naming a Theology of Land,” 24. This study is neither promoting a pantheistic view of human-land relationship where humanity is reduced to the level of low creatures nor is it a gnostic one where nature is treated with contempt but a Christian theology that upholds the uniqueness of humans as creatures in relation to the other creatures and defines humans and nature as kinsmen (See Asante, “Ecological Crisis,” 18).

<sup>58</sup> Robert Lanza and Robert Berman, *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature*, (Texas: Benbella Books Inc. 2009), 13.

<sup>59</sup> Lanza and Berman, *Biocentrism*, 13.

<sup>60</sup> Lanza and Berman, *Biocentrism*, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Gnanakan, “Creation, Christians and Environmental Stewardship,” 117.

<sup>62</sup> Gnanakan, “Creation, Christians and Environmental Stewardship,” 117.

Biocentrism places a strong demand on humankind to extend the needed respect to all aspects of the physical environment devoid of any emphasis on the money-making intentions of humans.<sup>63</sup>

There are two principles of Biocentrism. First, “what is perceived as reality, is a process that involves human consciousness.”<sup>64</sup> “The second principle states that human external and internal perceptions are inextricably intertwined.”<sup>65</sup> They are different sides of the same coin and cannot be separated.<sup>66</sup> It appears that in recent times, environmental advocates are mooting for biocentrism. This move is partly attributed to the fact that Christianity was in the recent past attacked for being anthropocentric. Thus, as a budding viewpoint, biocentrism as an ecological principle is thought to offer the needed hope to salvage the ecological crisis that humanity faces. It could be observed that this ecological idea has arisen from the environmental alertness in the global community, the impact of Eastern religions and perspectives, quantum physics, and a revival of ancient “animism” and indigenous socio-cultural understandings.<sup>67</sup> This view appears to be the order of the day emerging from modern society.<sup>68</sup> Since this new ecological perspective corresponds to the knowledge in ecological science as well as resonates with the popular worldview emanating from Eastern spirituality, ecologists seem to tilt toward this fanciful concept. The main focus of biocentrism is to nib in the bud the idea of human dominion and hegemony. That is, it seeks to avow that no particular creature must arrogate to itself an unwarranted sovereignty over the universe, since all the members of the creation community depend on one another for survival. Therefore, human beings are neither higher nor lower, greater nor lesser than any other creature in the ecosystem, rather, they form an integral part of that intricate piece of the work of creation. No doubt, this ecological view appears to be the most perfect model capable of correcting the strong anthropocentric tendencies of humankind.<sup>69</sup> “While biocentrism provides the needed alternative to anthropocentrism, it conflicts with the biblically justifiable solution for the Christian.”<sup>70</sup> “It is certainly a valid corrective for the arrogance that Christians have been accused of, but these insights need to be placed alongside their commitment to God as Creator and one who continues to sustain this creation.”<sup>71</sup> Also, “most African societies view the environment through the lens of biocentric axiology which places inherent value on the environment and all that it contains, a value that is independent of humans.”<sup>72</sup>

“This, however, should be differentiated from the biocentric egalitarianism of deep ecology.”<sup>73</sup> “While biocentric egalitarianism proposes the unnegotiable equality of value of all life forms, African biocentrism proposes the intrinsic value or worth of all life forms.”<sup>74</sup> “The cosmological arrangement of reality in the African indigenous thought system is one which respects the character of the hierarchy of beings but equally asserts that hierarchy does not in any way render some beings worthless.”<sup>75</sup>

## Theocentrism

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<sup>63</sup> Gnanakan, “Creation, Christians and Environmental Stewardship,” 117-118.

<sup>64</sup> Lanza and Berman, *Biocentrism*, 39.

<sup>65</sup> Lanza and Berman, *Biocentrism*, 39.

<sup>66</sup> Lanza and Berman, *Biocentrism*, 39.

<sup>67</sup> Gnanakan, “Creation, Christian and Environmental Stewardship,” 131.

<sup>68</sup> Gnanakan, “Creation, Christian and Environmental Stewardship,” 131.

<sup>69</sup> R. A. Young, *Healing the Earth –Theocentric Perspective on Environmental Problems and their Solutions*, (Nashville: Tenn. Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 125.

<sup>70</sup> Gnanakan, “Creation, Christian and Environmental Stewardship,” 118.

<sup>71</sup> Gnanakan, “Creation, Christian and Environmental Stewardship,” 118.

<sup>72</sup> Francis Appiah-Kubi and Gregory Aabaa, “African Traditional Worldview: Indigenous Resource for Rethinking Global Faith and Eco-cultic Spirituality,” *Asian Horizons*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (June, 2019): 170.

<sup>73</sup> Appiah-Kubi and Aabaa, “African Traditional Worldview: Indigenous Resource for Rethinking Global Faith and Eco-cultic Spirituality,” 170.

<sup>74</sup> Appiah-Kubi and Aabaa, “African Traditional Worldview: Indigenous Resource for Rethinking Global Faith and Eco-cultic Spirituality,” 170.

<sup>75</sup> Appiah-Kubi and Aabaa, “African Traditional Worldview: Indigenous Resource for Rethinking Global Faith and Eco-cultic Spirituality,” 170.

This is a theory that delineates a concept of having God as the main focus: taking an approach with God, a god, or gods as the focal point. Therefore, if one decides to remain faithful to the Bible, theocentric paradigm would be a major option, if not the only option. One may at this point appeal to Paul's definition of theocentrism where he advocates for a total ascription and submission of the whole idea of humanness and the rest of creation to God, the Creator. Paul's understanding of the Creator-creation relationship as expressed in Acts 17:28, "...in him, we live and move and have our being," is quite striking. If this idea is transferred to the whole of God's creative work in the universe, one could assert that all things attain their being, essence and purposefulness in their connexion to God, the Creator and Sustainer of life. The humanity of humans, one could say, is only authenticated by the fundamental concept of the God-human relationship. However, due to the alarming rate of environmental destruction and its attendant warnings to humanity, one needs to put theocentric views in their proper perspectives.

One observes that theocentrism manifests two differing views. There is one view that postulates that creation, both its aspects and or its entirety, exists because of God and to fulfil his purpose. This is validated by the Bible. Nevertheless, some people may overstretch the argument and may come to the conclusion that the violations in the universe would be healed by God in the new Creation. Therefore, humans do not need to put in any effort to salvage the environmental crisis. However, the eco-conscious world today would yearn for a different theocentric principle that satisfies their aspirations. Inasmuch as one reckons the centrality of God in the whole human constituents and endeavours, the fact that God expects human to assume their God-given responsibilities towards the environment, cannot be ignored. It is believed by many that everything was created by God, yet, each element of creation was made to fulfil a certain distinctive aim. These divine goals correspond to the principal intent of the Creator God, which renders it theocentric but retains its uniqueness in the creative order, just for its sake. It is important to stress that regardless of the roles that the various aspects of creation play, there is the need to emphasize to some extent, the concept of biocentrism. Every element in God's creation ambience, plays an essential role, ensuring that there is that balance in the ecosystem, which is so vital to achieving the needed harmony in the environment. For some natural rotations, successions, cycles and chains in the ecosystem to function properly, the role the individual parts play cannot be underestimated.

The concept of theocentrism teaches that humans' interactions in created order hinge on God, the transcendent. Following biocentrism headlong would lead to the deification of nature, whereas an impetuous anthropocentric mentality would lead to the divinization of humankind. In fact, a thoughtless relationship with nature is likely to result in either the idolization of nature or the romanticization of human beings, which may thwart the divinely ordained purpose intended by God for his creation. It has been suggested that when human beings who were made in the image of God, interact well with God, the creator, then, all ecosystem mechanisms will function properly and their related issues will be resolved. To Santmire, the best theocentric framework that would not cause one to either lean toward anthropocentrism<sup>76</sup> or cosmocentrism<sup>77</sup> is to acknowledge that humans plus the natural environment are fundamentally originated, integrated, and validated in God.<sup>78</sup>

"The Bible gives a distinct place to God as Creator. Claiming Christians' ecological views to be a biblical theology, the starting point obviously must be the Bible and the forceful teaching that the transcendent God is the Creator."<sup>79</sup> "It is this God who continues to motivate and energise Christians to become involved in restoring creation, towards becoming all that God has intended it to be."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> "Anthropocentrism" describes the tendency of setting the human creature over against nature and making humans feel superior to nature. This view makes human beings feel that they are the most important entity in the universe.

<sup>77</sup> "Cosmocentrism" delineates the tendency of submerging the human creature and placing emphasis on the universe or nature. It is a vision that places the highest importance on nature over and against humans.

<sup>78</sup> Paul H. Santmire, *Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 49.

<sup>79</sup> Gnanakan, "Creation, Christians and Environmental Stewardship," 131-132.

<sup>80</sup> Gnanakan, "Creation, Christians and Environmental Stewardship," 131-132.



“Christians have the role of being stewards in this magnificently created order, recognizing that God is above all and in all that they experience.”<sup>81</sup>

### **Pantheism**

The thoughtless and extreme pursuit of biocentrism could lead one into idolizing the natural environment. Pantheism is defined “as the belief that God is everything and everything is God.”<sup>82</sup> This implies that Pantheism denotes a belief that all that is, is of one substance. This postulates an absolute understanding of encountering God in his fullness in all creation. That is, the creation is of the same substance in quality as God, the Creator. “Pantheism is often referred to as a cosmocentric view because the focus of this view is the cosmos, namely the world, the earth, or the natural environment and this understanding recognizes, accepts, and respects the cosmos.”<sup>83</sup> Thus, pantheism relates that nature is an organism that embodies God, nature, and life.

To Asante, pantheism can lead to the romanticization of nature in an attempt to find a solution to the ecological problems of humans.<sup>84</sup> This attempt would thrust humankind into nature. It would exalt nature into humankind. In contrast, the pantheistic idea points out to humankind that he/she is not a master of nature but a kinsman of a sort to nature and as a result, reverence and gentle treatment should be accorded to it.<sup>85</sup> It is instructive to state that from an African perspective, giving reverence to an element of nature such as the earth, does not amount to nor imply worshipping it. However, the extent to which one may take this idea in practical terms, especially in the highly religious environment of Africa, is a cause for concern. Thus, a better model must be preferred.

### **Kinship Model: An OT Perspective**

Having acknowledged the value in the stewardship, caretakership and neighbourship, biocentrism, theocentrism and pantheistic models in describing the interconnections between humans and the earth, and having pointed out that their practical application poses a theoretical and theological challenge for humans, this paper proposes that the kinship model of human-earth/land relationship which elucidates what the creation narratives in the OT actually intend to put across could provide the best response to the ecological crisis in the world in general and Ghana in particular. This is in keeping with Asante’s view that humanity’s kinship to nature defines the human’s relationship to nature in terms of a responsible dominion which finds expression through care and respect for nature.<sup>86</sup> Kinship describes culturally defined relationships between individuals who are commonly thought of as having family ties. That is, it speaks about relationships or relatedness. It involves sharing of characteristics or origins. Kinship is the basis for the formation of social groups and the classification of people across the world.

In the OT, the interrelationship that was expected to exist among kinsmen was clearly spelt out. For instance, it was not preferable to take one’s kinsman as a slave (Exod. 21:1-16; Lev. 25:25-28). One was not to be oppressed or molested unduly by his fellow kinsmen (Zec. 7:10; Amos. 2:6; Mic. 2:1-3, Judg. 19; 20:12-14). The Israelites clearly, were expected to treat one another with respect and dignity as part of the covenant stipulations they had with God. Israel’s social structure was organized in such a way that it was a serious crime for a tribe or family or group to stay aloof when another Israelite tribe or family was under attack (Judg. 20:12-14; Num. 32:28-32).

The theology and worldview of a kinsman (kinship) which was well-established in Ancient Israel is implied to be the import of what was alluded to in the human-earth/land relationship in the creation narratives. The royal responsibilities given to humans which include, to have dominion, fill the earth, subdue, till and keep it (Gen. 1:28; 2:15), are not strange but describe the very cultural elements in a

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<sup>81</sup> Gnanakan, “Creation, Christians and Environmental Stewardship,” 131-132.

<sup>82</sup> Asante, “Ecological Crisis,” 15.

<sup>83</sup> Posman Pangihutan, and Demsy Jura “Ecotheology and Analysis of Christian Education in Overcoming Ecological Problems,” *International Journal of Science and Society*, Vol. 5, Issue 1, (2022): 18.

<sup>84</sup> Asante, “Ecological Crisis,” 5.

<sup>85</sup> Asante, “Ecological Crisis,” 9.

<sup>86</sup> Asante, “Ecological Crisis,” 19.

kinship relationship. For instance, the verb *rādāh*, “to have dominion” or “to rule,” is better understood in the sense of caregiving, nurturing; not exploiting the earth<sup>87</sup> just as kinsmen were not expected to abuse one another, especially the older ones and those in leadership in the kinship community.<sup>88</sup>

However, the word *kābaš*, “to subdue,” “conquer,” “subjugate,” “bring into bondage,” “force,” “keep under,” or “bring into subjection,” though has military connotations, may not imply encouragement for land abuse. It can be noted that the word, *kābaš*, has both constructive and negative implications. Positively,<sup>89</sup> it denotes, to conquer, subdue or bring into subjection, aspects of creation that appear disorganized and have the potential to threaten the eco-system. The hilly and rocky nature of the wilderness environment where Israel dwelt, might have influenced this understanding of the need for human effort in engaging such a challenging environment for agricultural and habitational purposes. Thus, “subdue,” in Genesis 1:28 implies that creation will not do human's bidding gladly or easily and that humans must now bring creation into submission by godly strength, bearing in mind that creation is a kinsman; but not an enemy.

The earth or environment is not to rule humankind. However, one may speculate that there is a twistedness in humanity which causes them to perform the task of subduing the earth with fierce and destructive delight. Try as humans might, in most places on Earth, they seem not to have been able to subdue nature with brute force. The occurrences of floods, landslides, earthquakes, pandemics, droughts and global warming that threaten humankind today in different parts of the world, could be considered as nature's daring response to the abusive and insensitive posture of humans towards the environment. This can also be explained that God who is the creator of the universe, sometimes intervenes in human life through the control of nature. Thus, floods, earthquakes, thunders, clouds etcetera, play a role in theophany narratives.<sup>90</sup>

However, the earth can be subdued positively by approaching it to care, preserve and work it to bring out the good in it without destruction. This is in keeping with the intended meaning of the use of “subdue,” in the promise of Micah 7:10, “He will subdue our iniquities.”<sup>91</sup> Theologically, God subdues the iniquities of his people to make them better with regard to his relationship with them. An example can be seen in Micah as it relates: “He will again have compassion on us; he will tread (subdue) our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19). The word, “subdue,” thus, implies clearly that the appraisal “good” motif in the creation narratives does not mean that creation is so perfect that it needs no extra development or attention –parts can fail or become disorderly through natural and geological processes.

Negatively,<sup>92</sup> *kābaš*, could mean to “disregard” or “neglect.”<sup>93</sup> This view suggests that whenever humans neglect their royal and Godlike responsibility for the development of the created order, and or sit aloof for the exploitation and destruction of the earth, their action amounts to negative subduing. In a more general sense, subduing involves development within kinship of human-non-human relationship, bringing order out of persistent chaos, to draw the earth along to its fullest creatural potential.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Terrence Fretheim, *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, I–Ma, Vol. 3, 21.

<sup>88</sup> In Lev. 25:43, God ordered His people who happen to become leaders or masters of others not to oppress them. He commanded, “You shall not rule over them with harshness”. In verse 46, God distinguishes how leaders or masters should *rule* (*rādāh*) over foreigners from how to rule over kinsmen. He says, “but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall *rule* (*rādāh*) over the other with harshness”.

<sup>89</sup> (See, Gen. 1:28; Zec. 9:15; “Devour and *subdue* (*kābaš*) with sling stones”; 1 Ch. 22:18, “...and the land is *subdued* before the Lord”).

<sup>90</sup> Emmanuel Kojo Ennin Antwi, *The Book of Jonah in the Context of Post Exilic Theology of Israel: An Exegetical Study*, (EOS Verlag Erzabtei St. Ottilien, 2013), 279.

<sup>91</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason L Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ( Publishers; New edition (October 1, 2003), 0951.

<sup>92</sup> (See, Mic. 7:19) “He will *subdue* (*kābaš*) our iniquities.” Meaning, their iniquities would be disregarded.

<sup>93</sup> James Strong, *Abingdon's Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 3533.

<sup>94</sup> Fretheim, *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 21.

It is instructive to state that inasmuch as *kāḇaš*, “subdue,” could connote coercive activities in interhuman relationships (Num. 32:22, 29), enemies are not implied here—and it is only in the context of the creation narratives in which the verb applies to the relationship between human and nonhuman creatures.<sup>95</sup> The idea of humans ensuring that the earth, a kinsman, is in proper order and is well developed to attain its fullest creational potential, raises the concomitant need for tilling and keeping of which the creation narrator minces no words, “The LORD God took the human and put him in the garden of Eden to *till* it and *keep* it” (Gen. 2:15). The verb used *’āḇaḏ*, denotes, to “work,” “till,” “serve,” “keep.”<sup>96</sup> The idea of human responsibility for caring, nurturing and cultivating the earth is hinted at right here. Working to ensure order and to improve the earth is the key responsibility and a blessing for humans. This is in keeping with Waltke’s view that work is a gift of God, not punishment for sin.<sup>97</sup>

The second verb, *šāmar*, (Gen. 2:15) which means, “to hedge about” (as with thorns) is “guard.” Generally to “protect,” “attend to,” and “keep”<sup>98</sup> is also in place to press home the central role of humans doing everything possible to ensure the well-being of the earth as required by kinsmen in a kinship relationship. The fundamental idea of the root of the word is “to exercise great care over,” “do carefully or diligently” and “to take care” of things such as a garden (Gen. 2:15), a flock (Gen. 30:31), and a house (2 Sam. 15:16).<sup>99</sup> In the text (Gen. 2:15) it has been rendered in *qal* infinitive construct suffix third person feminine singular.<sup>100</sup> It is one of the verbs that reveals humans’ responsibilities as given by God in the garden to diligently take care of the environment, which happens to be a kinsman.

This challenges the scholarly view that the creation story in the OT teaches exploitation and abuse in human-earth relations. In the sense that at one breadth, the Creator cannot exhort humans to exploit and abuse the earth and on another, instruct humans to attend to it and protect it. In a situation like this, a reader is expected to delve further into the use of the instruction, “rule and subdue,” to ascertain its meaning in context to arrive at a better interpretation for target readers. More generally, subduing involves intra-creational development, bringing order out of continuing disorder, and drawing the world along to its fullest creational potential.<sup>101</sup> Human subdues negatively, by disregarding this godlike responsibility for the development of the created order.

It is instructive to note that the word, “till” (Gen. 2:15) *’āḇaḏ*, denotes, to *work, till, serve, keep,*<sup>102</sup> *cultivate*<sup>103</sup> etcetera. The etymology of this word seems to share the ideas of several Semitic roots, e.g. the old Aramaic root which means “to do” or “make,” an Arabic root meaning “to worship, and obey” God.<sup>104</sup> When used about things, it is usually followed by an accusative of the thing upon which the labour is expended, e.g. “to till” a field (Gen 2:5 and often elsewhere); “to dress” vineyards; workers or artisans in flax (Isa 19:9) or in city construction (Ezk. 48:18). Occasionally, it is without the accusative as in Deuteronomy 15:19, “to till” the ground.<sup>105</sup>

A syntactical study of the creation narratives especially the benediction or blessing component “...be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it...” (Gen. 1:28) reveals that God intended to cause humans to become fruitful. Humankind’s work (action) was likely to become fruitful as a result of God’s action (blessing). This implies that humankind who carries the blessing of fruitfulness from God is under the command of God to make the earth fruitful but not to destroy nor abuse it. Humankind’s fruitfulness was not meant to be a one-time stop action but ought to be ongoing,

<sup>95</sup> Fretheim, *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary*,

<sup>96</sup> Strong, *Strong’s Concordance*, 5647.

<sup>97</sup> Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 87.

<sup>98</sup> Strong, *Strong’s Concordance*, 8104.

<sup>99</sup> Harris et al, *Theological Wordbook*, 2414.

<sup>100</sup> Bible Works 9.

<sup>101</sup> Fretheim, *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Strong, *Strong’s Concordance*, 5647.

<sup>103</sup> Holladay, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 6001.

<sup>104</sup> Harris et al, *Theological Wordbook*, 1553.

<sup>105</sup> Harris et al, *Theological Wordbook*, 1553

spreading across the whole earth and ensuring that the environment entrusted to them receives the touch of the divine nature in them.

In addition, the potential of the earth is a great sign for humankind in terms of its relationship or interconnectedness with the Earth. It reveals that humanity is of the same potential as the earth just as kinsmen share biological characteristics. Griffiths commenting on this states that “If one has a piece of land, and he clears it, ploughs, waters and takes care of it, that land will produce massive and wonderful things.”<sup>106</sup> It is revealing to note that in Hebrew, *'ādāmāh*, is sometimes rendered as *'ādāmeḥ*, which means “I can resemble” or “I can be like,” implying that humans can resemble or be like the earth in quality or function. Great potential can come out of humans as great wealth comes out of the ground. The possibility of this is not far-fetched since both humans and the earth are kinsmen or relatives.

## CONCLUSION

All of this is to say that in OT theology, there is enough evidence that proves the interconnectedness between humankind and the earth/land/ground. This relatedness manifests in the idea that humanity was formed out of the dust of the earth, implying that humankind is a product of the earth and to some extent, a relative of the earth. In the Christian religious space, the discussions concerning the human-earth/land relationship have concentrated on the human attitude towards the earth. Assessing the relationship from a human angle has resulted in ecological models such as stewardship, caretakership and neighbourship as the description of what humanity is to the earth. The current study acknowledges that these ecological models proposed by scholars have biblical bases yet, since the “economic man” with an economic mentality and the ambition to be like God subordinates nature in the process,<sup>107</sup> humans would find it easier to pursue their personal ambitions of exploitation under these ecological models. Therefore, this paper has proposed the “kinship model” to drive home the idea that humans and the earth are relatives or kinsmen. Humans who are kinsmen are expected to seek the well-being of one another and every form of oppression is frowned upon in such a relationship. Much the same way, since that is exactly the nature of the human-earth/land relationship as related by the creation narratives, humans are to ensure as their godly responsibility, that the earth is cared for, nurtured, well developed in order to bring out its full potential.

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<sup>106</sup> Thomas W.H. Griffith, *Genesis*, (Michigan: W. M. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 41.

<sup>107</sup> Mary Mellor, “Women, Nature and the Social Construction of “Economic Man”, in *Ecological Economics*, 20, (1997): 137.

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