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Land Ethic According to the Biblical Book of Genesis and Isaiah

Samuel A. Bassey[1*], Joseph N. Ogar[2], Asira E. Asira[3], Ekomobong I. Bassey[4].

[1,2,3,]Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar,
Cross River, 540271, Nigeria.
Email: samuelbassey15@yahoo.com[1*]
Email: josephnkang@unical.edu.ng[2*]
Email: asira@unical.edu.ng[3*]

[4,]Independent Researcher, Calabar, Cross River State, 540271, Nigeria.
Email: praiseita1@gmail.com[4]

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ABSTRACT

In a paper titled "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," Lyn White castigates the Judaeo-Christian religious beliefs for their contribution to the emerging environmental crisis. White construes the creation account in Genesis to mean that nature is created exclusively for man's benefit, and that nature has no intrinsic worth and value. He concludes that Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion in the world, which provides the impetus to modern science and technology. This paper as a reaction to Lyn White is an attempt at exploring a striking coincidence of views between the book of Genesis and Prophets Isaiah's religious-moral ecology and secular social ecology. The focus of this study is the way the two books' writers imagine and portray the world of nature and its relationship to the prevailing social and political conditions. The critical position adopted for this study is that of social ecology, which lays particular stress on the impact of social and political conditions on the environment. The narrativization of events is studied along with their figurative constructions as pastoral, wilderness, and apocalyptic tropes for their ecological import in the anthropocentric world of thought. This research shows that both the book of Genesis and prophet Isaiah's land ideology plays a crucial role in the theological construction of the Man-Nature relationship. Specifically, Isaiah appeals to his audiences' inherited lore of the land as a legacy that has deep roots in the ancestral and primeval history. The present study is also an attempt at bringing the focus back to the point of human agency and its responsibility for the environment.

Keywords: Environmental Land ethics, Bible, Genesis, Isaiah.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to offer an eco-hermeneutic reading of the Books of Genesis and Isaiah in the Hebrew Scripture (the Old Testament of Christian tradition). The book of Genesis gives an account of the origin of the world and man, state of nature, and offers some insight into the causes of environmental degradation. However, the book of Isaiah is also considered as the centrepiece of prophetic literature. Isaiah was one of the prophets who flourished in the eighth century BCE. It might be asked what possible contribution to the ecological question could be made by a work composed by the book of Genesis as well as a Hebrew prophet of classical antiquity for whom the environmental problem such as we know it today did not exist? Questions of the sort do strike a valid point, however, matters such as choice of lifestyle, ordering of priorities, and equitable distribution of resources, ethical considerations are paramount and this is where the two ancient Hebrew Biblical texts (Genesis and Isaiah) meets current ecological concerns.

This research will argue that the two books of the scripture offer a meta-narrative into the state of nature as well as land ethics. The motivation for this study is realized from Marlow's (2009) book titled *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics,* which proposes a reading of the prophetic texts of Hosea, Amos, and First Isaiah within the framework of what she calls the "ecological triangle". As Marlow (2009) also points out, "In the biblical narrative, Israel's religious, economic, and political identity is very much tied up with the concept of the land as Israel's inheritance". This study belongs with recent attempts to reread the Bible through a green lens, to shift the focus from an exclusive theocentric/anthropocentric reading to one that takes into account the claims of the natural world, most especially, Land Ethics. This seems a useful model to explore the complex interrelationship between man, nature, and God.

MAN - NATURE RELATIONSHIP IN GENESIS CONTEXT

Western Christianity has come in for severe criticism for allegedly endorsing blatant exploitation of natural resources, claiming a right to dominion over the earth on biblical grounds (Bassey et al., 2020). To address this conception, it is necessary to examine the Judaeo-Christian understanding of man's relation to his environment not only to show how the relevant biblical sources have been interpreted and reinterpreted down the centuries but also to clarify the larger context of ideas in which one might assess the ecological import of both Genesis and Isaiah's text. Christianity and Islam share a common ancestry and a common ethical framework, namely, that of ethical monotheism. They assert the existence of a God who is unique, transcendent, and self-subsistent. Man's relation to God, as well as fellow humans, is governed by moral laws (Eba 2020). The relationship between man and God on the one hand, and between man and man on the other, take precedence over that of man and his environment. In contrast with primitive nature religions, Hebrew thought conceives God as a self-subsistent being apart from nature. Not a mere abstraction from natural forces, this God is the creator of the world and its redeemer. While ancient creation myths lie outside the temporal order, Christian creation stories function in the context of Israel's history. Creation itself is the first of the Judeo-Christian God's mighty acts in history, which identifies him as the Lord of the world in time which sets the stage for his judging and redeeming action. Perhaps the most significant difference between nature religions and the Judaeo- Christian faith is that the latter's focus on the human story and its strong

ethical component. Here, human actions are judged in terms of the moral law established as a covenant between man and God. Violation of covenant obligation is severely punished by an act- consequence formula of ethical entailment. Although the focus is on the human story, this in no way detracts from man's responsibility to the non-human world.

This point can be illustrated with the story of the Garden of Eden. Eden, despite being infinitely rich in resources of happiness, is an open space, open to external threats. The devil can enter it at will and destroy its happiness. Moreover, there is a limit set to human freedom, marked by the tree (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) in the centre. Effectively, therefore, Eden was a proving ground of covenant of loyalty and love. And the consequences of man's actions extend to all of nature such that when man fell all of nature degraded *with* him, and *because of* him. This is also similar to our current domain where man's current disobedience (Sin) and attempt to conquer nature now also degraded nature *with* man, and *because of* man. For both Jews and Christians, the crucial texts of the Bible that bear directly on man's relations with the non-human world are Genesis 1.26, 28, and 2.15.

> "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and overall the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Gen. 1.26).
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> "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Gen. 1.28) And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it". (Gen. 2.15).

Controversy has raged over the precise signification of the term 'dominion' in Gen. 1.26 and 28 (Twardziłowski 2017). According to S. Yitzḥaqi, an authoritative medieval commentator, the Hebrew word for dominion in verses 26 and 28 can signify both "dominion" and "descending". The text may appear to mean that man will rule over the natural world if he proves himself worthy to do so. Otherwise, he will sink lower than the animals and the animals will rule over him. Having been made in the image of God, man must not abuse the trust placed in him which is that he will be merciful and just as God is merciful and just: "Just as God rules creation, so man, created in God's image, rules the earth. Humans are expected to image God in their dealings with the rest of creation and as God is just and merciful, so should they be just and merciful" (Wahle 1995, p.118).

Shelton (2015) observes that the verses in question permitted to have dominion over animals to utilize their services for his subsistence. But he must not hold their life cheap or slaughter them for food. His natural diet is vegetarian. In this connection, it is worth remarking that Gen. 29-30 (you mean Genesis 1:29-30??) place man and beasts on the same footing with regard to food. Adam was not permitted to kill any creature and eat its flesh, but all alike were enjoined to eat herbs. While most texts point to the superiority of humans over nature and the animals, rabbis in *Midrash Genesis Rabba* (a commentary on Genesis which is read during the synagogue prayer on some festivals) is of the opinion that man was created last to humble him before the least significant of the animals, to deny him the illusions of pedigree. However, whatever superiority within this sense, it enjoins humans to be responsible in their dealings with the lower orders of

creation. This could be seen as "weak anthropocentricism" as long as it allows man to act responsibly towards nature (Bassey 2020). This is the sense of Gen. 2.15 where the task assigned to Adam is to cultivate the garden, preserve, serve, and protect it. Thus, the hints of monarchical rule in the first creation account are heavily qualified in the second, being transformed into the idea of responsible stewardship which involves the task of developing natural resources and preserving them. Rabbi T. Marx, concur with this when reflecting accurately the nature of our modern dilemma: "we have to develop the earth's resources without ruining its ability to replenish itself" (Wollenberg 2018). According to Rabbi Guigi, the terms "cultivate and guard" signify expressly that this garden is someone else's property. Rabbi T. Marx concurs with him on this. The garden belongs to God and not to man. Human task is to husband its resources and pass them on to our children in a perfect state so that they, in their turn, can hand it over to posterity. However, man's disobedience to God caused him to fall and he was sent out of the Garden of Eden. However, God promised redemption, showing an act of benevolence.

PROPHETISM IN ANCIENT ISRAEL: PROPHET ISAIAH IN FOCUS

In primitive as well as highly sophisticated religions, there have been traditions of prophecy throughout their history or at some stage of their development. By prophecy, one understands the function of mediation and interpretation of the divine mind and will (Sours 1997). By contrast with private soothsayers and diviners, the *nabis* (prophets) of the Old Testament times were regarded pre-eminently as public professionals, often working in groups, who may be consulted on matters of policy or ethical conduct (Childs 1996). Prophets claimed to derive their messages from dreams, visions, and mysterious or mystic experiences, as well as through various divinatory practices.

> The prophets were not mere predictors. Their Hebrew name, nabi, comes from a root "to boil up as a fountain" (Gesenius); hence the fervor of inspiration (2 Peter 1.21). Others interpret it as from an Arabic root [meaning] "spokesman" of God, the Holy Ghost supplying him with words; communicated by dreams (Joel 2.28; Job 33.14-17); or visions (Stacey & Campbell 2008, p. 54).

The history of biblical prophecy begins with Moses. Amos 2.10 ascribes the beginning of the prophetic tradition to the Mosaic age: "Also I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and led you forty years through the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite." Evidence of ecstatic prophecy has been found in the history of eleventh-century Phoenicia and among the Canaanites in the time of Elijah. In the bible, 1 Sam. 10.5-7 tell of bands of ecstatic prophets meeting with Samuel; later, Samuel, too, falls into ecstasy and joins in the dancing and shouting, moved by the spirit of God. Early prophets appear to have been of the class of wild ecstatics who prophesied when "seized on" by the spirit of God. Their motive was to stimulate patriotic and religious fervor. Usually, they prophesied in groups and were given the generic name "sons of prophets" which meant "members of prophetic guilds," "professional prophets" and "prophetic disciples."

This Book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Scripture (the Old Testament of Christian tradition) is considered as the centrepiece of prophetic literature (Creach 1998). It comprises sixty-six chapters and is second only to The Book of Psalms in length. The New Testament is replete with quotations and allusions to the Book of Isaiah. This book

is unrivalled among prophetic writings in the majesty of its dramatic language, its range of theological themes, and the power of historical perspective. Isaiah was a prophet of the southern kingdom, Judah. He was probably a Jerusalemite. His ministry may have begun in the final years of the reign of, Uzziah, King of Judah (Seitz 1990). It certainly extended over forty years from the death of Uzziah in 740 BCE through the regimes of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah to the year 701 (Zapff 2017). He was married to a prophetess and had two sons. Few scholars today would hold the view that the entire book was written by Isaiah. Despite the plurality of perceived authorship and wide gaps in dates and circumstances of composition, there is no reason to doubt that Isaiah of Jerusalem was the dominant personality whose influence shines through the entire prophecy. An indication of the work's thematic unity is given by the fact that the concluding verses in chapters 65-66 repeat almost fifty words from chapter one, thus enclosing the entire text in a clearly articulated envelope structure. Isaiah was one of a group of prophets who flourished in the eighth century BCE. His immediate predecessors were Hosea and Amos. These prophets lived and preached in a turbulent period of Jewish history when the Israelites' faith and covenant loyalty were sorely tried by extraordinary religious and political events (Zapff 2017). It was against this **somber** background of moral, religious, and political degradation that the prophets undertook their divinely ordained ministry, to be spokesmen for God, warning, guiding, and consoling their people in their time of trial and tribulation. The burden of their prophecies was this: the Israelites have violated the covenant with Yahweh, have gone after strange gods and degenerated into vice and sin; they must now await the judgment of God who will cause their land to be laid waste and send them into slavery; however, he will not abandon them: a remnant will be saved and restored to their land with renewed prosperity and power. The prophets, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, and Micah preached in the days of the Assyrian rise to power in the latter part of the eighth century. The decline of Assyria and the rise of Babylon, a century later, set the stage for the prophetic activity of Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

Given the circumstances of prophetic utterances, a prophet cannot be expected to tell a continuous story; his deliverances are called forth by the needs of the moment. He was so placed in the history of his people that he could draw on a well-established corpus of oral and written tradition. He could pick up, drop and pick up again, as occasion required, the well-known motifs of sacred history and apply them to his particular situation. A single oracle may embody a narrative, modulating from the denunciation of evil, threats of judgment to promises of redemption. Specifically, in Isaiah's prophecy, there is a relentless insistence on human agency and responsibility in the maintenance of a healthy social and natural environment. The operation of divine judgment which runs like a red thread through the entire narrative has consequences not just for the human world but for the non-human world as well. The natural world suffers because of human iniquity: "Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers" (1.7). Admittedly, this is a moral ecology that bypasses the play of secondary causes and establishes a direct link between human decisions and choices, divine judgment, and the state of the environment. A secular reader might be inclined to dismiss this reasoning as the logic of outworn mythology. However, the point needs to be made that this religious understanding of man's relation to his environments is put at the service of a most stringent social morality.

LAND AS INHERITANCE: GENESIS AND ISAIAH'S LAND ETHICS IN CONTEXT

The complementary notions of "Promised Land" and "Chosen People," originating in the story of Abraham, have had a shaping role in the evolution of Israel as a concept, and ultimately, in the formation of Israel's nationhood (Etlinger 1962). These notions compel a detailed examination of the Biblical *land ethics* ideology. However, the first book of the Bible (Genesis), gave an account of the first man on earth called "Adam". The etymology of the word "Adam" (*adamah* means soil) affirms man's physical affinity with the earth. In the two creation narratives of the book of Genesis, God's very first actions were the building of suitable habitat for living beings and the second God provides for soil and water that can support life (Berry 2011). The Garden of Eden itself is a land of divine provision, an ideal habitat for living beings. Here all animals are brought before Adam for him to name them. This indicates an intimate acquaintance between man and his fellow-creatures. Man is placed in charge of this Garden; his task is to till it and keep it. This Garden comes to man as a gift, but it is not an unconditional gift. There is an implicit covenant between the giver and recipient of this gift. For all its abundance, this ideal habitat is vulnerable to the violence of human desire. The presence of a forbidden tree and the serpent in Eden placed a moral responsibility on man. Therefore, Eden was a place of continuous moral testing. Reflecting on the Eden-episode in connection with moral theology Alexander Lucie-Smith comments:

> …Post-Eden human consciousness is painful at times, it is also a state of greater consciousness in which progress can be made. Eden is lost, but not all is lost; much remains… this story represents our "*orientation in moral space*" to use a phrase of the philosopher, Charles Taylor. The story provides us with several indispensable compass points that enable us to think about morality: in this case the idea of communion with God, represented by the Garden, and the idea of the loss of such a communion, represented by our expulsion from the Garden. The story itself (or narrative as most writers prefer to express it) is the vehicle of expression of these truths. It is in reading stories such as this one, passed down through centuries of tradition that we come to be moral people. …Therefore we can now see, it is to be hoped, just one way in which the Bible has formed our morality; and what is true for the Garden of Eden story is true for many other tales in the Old Testament as well (Lucie-Smith 2006: 39).

If the forbidden tree can be seen as marking the ecological limit of human intervention in his habitat, then plucking the fruit was a plain violation of nature. The terms of a moral ecology adumbrated in the Eden narrative, "accursed be the soil because of you" (Gen. 3.17), are here spelled out. However, Adam's punishment was mitigated somewhat by the promise of redemption for Adam's descendants. From the creation and fall story of Genesis, it is evident that people are bound up with the well-being of the land of Eden and its produce. To summarize the Genesis story D. Mitchell (2009: 47.1-2), recapitulates the four primary connections between the contemporary writings on agrarian thought and the ethic of the biblical text:

1) The land comes first, and has "expectations";
2) Acceptance of ignorance as primary to the human condition;

3) A modest materialism of meeting material needs with humility and reasonableness; and
4) The value of land is not monetary.

From the point of view of a *land ethic*, the key points are: the gifting of the land of incomparable riches, the abuse of that gift by an act of violation of the natural order, the consequent loss of that ideal home with redemption to be realized in the remote future. Already in this, primeval history established a pattern of an event which recurs throughout patriarchal and historical narratives: covenant, violation of the covenant, judgment followed by exile, redemption. For instance, in another example of the Flood-narrative involving Noah and his family, a violent world is literally disposed of land, the physical "ground" of life. The land is latter restored to Noah and his family and an everlasting covenant is made with all the creatures of the world. However, Abraham begins the history of the "chosen people" and the "Promised Land". Further moral prescriptions define the relationships between people and land in a way that bespeaks concern for the individual worth and dignity of every constituent of the created world. Those regarding the sabbatical year (Lev. 25.2-7) have an exclusive focus on the well-being of the land, based on its inviolable apartness and right to be protected against anthropocentric appropriation and exploitation. The prescription about the holiness of land (Lev.25.23) also adds a theological dimension to the sabbatical injunctions. Elaborate laws governing the use of the land after the Israelites have inherited it develop the interface between the physical and the spiritual, showing the land to be an arena of spiritual testing as well as a source of livelihood.

For the Jewish patriarchs sojourning among foreign nations, Canaan as Promised Land was a land of anticipation; it was a yeaning image for the Israelites journeying towards it, an image that beckoned and receded before the people wandering in the desert. Although this land came to them as a gift, it can be lost. Its possession and enjoyment are always hinged on God's covenant with his people and the covenant entailed *responsibility* as well as promises of blessings. With the conquest and settlement of Canaan, Israel's political formation as a nation may be said to have been completed; but their spiritual formation is still in the making: the land of promise must now function as the providing ground of Israel's covenant commitments. However, the above is the conceptual world of Isaiah's prophecy: Promise Land - a land of potential riches held in trust, redolent of images of possession, security, and rest but tied in with an ethic of duty and responsibility. It lies behind his denunciations, threats, and promises. The prophet appeals to his audience's historical memory and imagination. He draws upon inherited lore of sacred history that stretches back through hundreds of references to land in history books in the Pentateuch to its ultimate referent in the Eden narrative. The Book of Isaiah, as it has come down to us, is an anthology of poems, composed by various hands, at various times, in response to differing political and cultural situations. The prophet refers to social crimes; speaking, of Jerusalem, the prophet exclaims bitterly: "How the faithful city is become a harlot! It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers" (Isa.1.21). Judgment is sure to follow to avert which there is only one way: "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil;" (Isa.1.16). Between them, the widow and the orphan represent all the marginalized, oppressed classes of society. They represent people who need protection from the guardians of justice. However, instead of administering justice, the princes have connived with the despoilers of the

helpless: “Thy princes [are] rebellious, and companions of thieves: every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them” (Isa.1.23).

The opening verses of The Book of Isaiah contain, perhaps, the best-known allusion to the covenant motif: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me” (Isa. 1.2). The covenant motif is couched in the literary form of “covenant lawsuit”. Yahweh, who has concluded a treaty with Israel, appears as judge and plaintiff against Israel’s covenant violations. He summons the universe as a witness to the prosecution, states the offence before going on to pronounce judgment. He compares humans with animals and finds the former failing in loyalty and gratitude, it threatens judgment that will overtake the nation but promises redemption to those who are willing to repent and mend their ways: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land” (Isa.1.18-19). In chapter 24, verse 5 the pollution of the land is directly linked to the violation of the covenant: “The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant.” For readers familiar with the Genesis story the first verse “The Earth is polluted because of you” has an all too familiar ring, being an echo of the Genesis verse “cursed be the ground because of you”. One need, hardly be told that the term ‘polluted’ as used by the prophet has none of the meaning attaching to it in the context of technological modernity. Israel’s being a predominantly agrarian culture, there was little risk of pollution from industrial waste and chemical agents. The term is to be understood as referring to the laying waste of the land in war, which is a consequence of divine judgment. Chapters 24-27, regarded by many scholars as to the apocalypse of Isaiah, deal with the day of the Lord when judgment is delivered on the whole world. The “ancient covenant” is an allusion to the covenant with Noah which establishes a pact between God and all mankind. Breaking of the covenant brings on judgment like a new flood (“for the windows on high will be opened” 5.18) to engulf the world. The panoramic sweep of the vision is characteristic of the apocalyptic genre. In a similar vein, addressing himself to the smugly complacent, pleasure-loving women of Jerusalem (32.13), the prophet says that their time is up. The “pleasant fields, the fruitful wine,” will no longer supply their table. The soil will not yield a plentiful crop. Instead, it will be “overgrown with thorns and briers.” The “wanton city” will have cause to mourn the desolation of its homes.

In Isa. 34.4, homely images of the natural world are employed to figure forth a cosmic catastrophe. The effect sought is to make the unfamiliar familiar, to translate a cosmic disaster into one that a farming world knows well: the stars withering away in the heavens is compared to the leaf wilting on the vine, the fig withering on the tree. And yet, one receives the impression that the speaker has in mind more than a similitude between the happenings on earth and in the heavens. It is, rather, the cosmic sweep of the apocalyptic judgment that is intended. After all, earth’s fertility is dependent on the sun’s heat and light. In chapter 7, Isaiah speaks of the judgment pronounced on king Ahaz who sought to appease Assyria rather than depend on God. The devastation wrought by Assyria would leave few survivors behind. Those who do survive would be reduced to eating curds and honey, the food of the nomads. The land would have

reverted from agriculture to grazing land and hunting ground: “And it shall come to pass in that day, [that] every place shall be, where there were a thousand vines at a thousand silverlings, it shall [even] be for briers and thorns. With arrows and with bows shall [men] come thither; because all the land shall become briers and thorns” (Isa.7.23-24). This passage sets up a contrast between bare physical existence and the arts and elegances of civilized life. The biblical author makes clear where his preferences lie. Reversion to the state of nature is unambiguously projected as a cultural degradation. Such an attitude of mind aligns the speaker firmly on the side of those who set great store by refinements of culture and control over the environment. He will have none of that idolatry of nature that has come to characterize romantic and primitivist cults. After the devastation of the land by conquering powers, the next stage in the working out of divine judgment is exile and wandering of which the physical setting is a wilderness or desert or an inhospitable foreign land. The opening lines of Psalm 137 capture accurately the exiles. Feeling of displacement and longing for home, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat mourning and weeping when we remembered Zion” (v.1).

The theme of exile is introduced in chapter 6. Yahweh calls and commissions Isaiah to prophesy to his people. To the prophet’s question “How long?” the Lord replies that he is to preach “Until the cities are desolate”, depopulated, the whole land laid waste, “Until the Lord removes men far away, and the land is abandoned more and more” (6.11). In the oracles dealing with exile in Babylon, there is a pointed reference to the experience of trial and testing, comparable to the ordeal of desert wandering: “Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction” (Isa.48.10), but there is hardly any mention of the physical environment of the exile’s life. The focus is on the inner struggle, on the sense of ‘lostness’, of utter abandonment on foreign soil. In ecological terms, the aftermath of judgment has been the desertification of inhabited and cultivated land and hence the obliteration of human culture: cultivated land reverts to the wilderness; cities become deserts; its ruins are overgrown with briars and thorns; jackals and foxes roam the deserted streets. The most striking portrayals of this evolution in reverse occur in descriptions of the judgment upon the nations: in the judgment on Babylon, after giving an account of the bloodiest vengeance on the human inhabitants, the oracle forecasts a fate similar to Sodom’s and Gomorrah’s for Babylon, “the jewel of kingdoms”; she “ shall be overthrown,” “shall never be inhabited,”

> “But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there. And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in [their] pleasant palaces: and her time [is] near to come, and her days shall not be prolonged” (Isa.13.21-22).

What all these descriptions add up to is a view of a profound disorder in the created world. The fortunes of man and nature are inextricably interlinked. A disorder in the world of man leads to, is mirrored by, a disorder in the natural world. Nature that had been assigned its place by God’s creative word breaks its bounds, invades the human world. This is “uncreation”, a return to primeval chaos (Hess 1994: 322), a “decreation” of the works of human minds and hands (Johnson 1988: 81). In the prophet’s understanding of the historical process, uncreation cannot be the last word. It cries out for redemption, for the restoration of harmony between man and God, and man and nature that existed at creation. And so, the narrative of this particular phase of Israel’s

history must conclude with a new exodus from captivity, with the vision of new heavens and a new earth, For the LORD shall comfort Zion: "he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody" (Isa.51.3).

Mention of Eden provides the key to the vision of transcendent harmony to be realized in the messianic era: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them" (Isa. 11.6). This restoration motif recurs in Isa. 65.25: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock." Thus, First, Second and Third Isaiah contain references to an Eden-like dwelling as the hoped-for messianic ideal of harmony within the created order. These references function as a dramatic climax, contained within a reassuring narrative of resolution. Eden draws man and nature together in an organic unity, comprehends them in a single vision of the physical-spiritual, human-natural realms. To unpack the meaning of this paradisal image is to be aware that this is the Bible's picture of how human life ought to be lived. In the first place, the enclosed nature of the perfect garden suggests its difference from ordinary life. The simplicity of life in the Garden is the very antithesis of the complexities of civilization. After the fall, the enclosure signifies a fixed barrier between original perfection- an ideal past- and a fallen experience. It may also imply the limits and finitude of human life even in its original perfection.

In brief, the Garden of Eden is a symbolic formulation of the complex issues involved in achieving and maintaining a good life. All the physical resources are there. It is man's task to make judicious use of them. He is free to cooperate, or not to co-operate with a divinely instituted order. The forbidden fruit is to serve as a sign, a warning, that this freedom, when exercised in violence as a manifestation of power, must entail tragic consequences. This last aspect of the Garden image corresponds to the relentless insistence in Isaiah prophecy on the observance of the terms of a covenanted relationship. It is made clear that the restoration promised will only come about if man recovers his covenant-loyalty and co-operates with the Spirit of the Lord. Only then will justice and righteousness prevail, "Then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remains in the fruitful field. And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever" (Isa.32.16-17). This passage may be compared with Isa. 11.3-9 which brings together the themes of a just society and an Eden-like harmony in the created order. What is particularly striking in both passages is the fusion of inner and outer worlds, of the social and natural order: "Right will dwell in the desert and justice abide in the orchard." Here is the core of Isaiah's ecological thinking, a conception of justice and righteousness that fuses together the world of man ("Right" and "Justice") and the world of nature ("Desert" and "Orchard").

GENESIS AND ISAIAH'S MORAL ECOLOGY: THE ECO-SOCIAL FIGURATION

In the Genesis account of creation, the world of nature is subordinated to the human story. However, this does not detract from the fact that the natural order is shown to have *intrinsic worth* and *value*: God reviews the work of each day and finds it "good" and he finds the completed created order "very good" (Gen.1.31). Part of this

commendation should surely apply to nature's worth as an object of aesthetic contemplation and delight. This perfect world of the divine provision is a covenant of works for which God demands obedience in return. When man disobeys and falls from grace, nature too falls with him. God curses the man and withdraws his blessing in the works of nature: "Cursed be the ground because of you!" (Gen. 3.17) (emphasis added). The Scripture lays the blame where it belongs: "because of you", and thus the garden becomes a wilderness of "thorns and thistles" (Gen.3.18) where man must earn his bread by arduous labour. Here religious understanding presents nature as a victim of human pride and greed, and not as his agent or willing instrument in the transgression.

J. Delumeau (2000) in *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition* personified nature is represented as expressing a desperate sense of betrayal, of victimization by man: "Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat / Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe, / That all was lost" (782-4). Judgment is followed by expulsion from the garden, but not without the possibility of redemption. This hope is expressed in Gen 3.15 where it is said that the offspring of the woman will decisively overcome the wiles of the tempter, Satan. Already within its scheme of fall, judgment and exile and promise of redemption, they see established the fundamental pattern of their historical experience:

> The rabbinic sages compare the story, of Israel's possession and loss of the land with the story of creation and Adam's and Eve's possession and loss of Eden. The key is their quest for patterns, and in scripture, they find a huge pattern. It is one that shows the parallel between Adam and Eve's possession and loss of Eden by reason of disobedience and Israel's possession of the land of Israel and loss of the land by reason of disobedience. From the rabbi's perspective, the entire narrative of Scripture from Genesis through kings shows how Israel in the land recapitulates the story of Adam and Eve in Eden. But it is a pattern with a difference. Adam and Eve lost paradise, never to return. Israel went into exile but atoned for its sin and then got back to the land, and with the Torah for guidance, would endure there (Neusner 2006, p. 20).

The creation narrative may be said to constitute the substructure of Isaiah's exposition of the historical crisis, its consequences and its resolution. The only explicit reference to Eden in the text occurs in chapter 51, verse 3. Elsewhere, the narrative functions to provide the emotional and spiritual drive of recurring plot motifs such as violation of covenant loyalty, judgment, exile and return. The restoration of Zion envisioned in the kingdom oracles draws on the same symbolic resource for its conception of harmony and wholeness in the created order. From the eco-social point of view, the significance of the Eden narrative is that it is a symbolic projection of a nonviolent and inclusive world, that it recognizes the intrinsic worth of non-human creation and that it incorporates in its Sabbath injunction the notion of a salutary restraint on man's acquisitive urge. As the author of the Genesis story, Isaiah, too, starts with the conception of an original state of innocence which he expresses in terms of covenant love and loyalty to God. Its classic statement is to be found in Deut. 11.13-16:

> And it is most sure that if you faithfully obey the commandments I enjoin on you today, loving Yahweh your God and serving him with all your heart and all your soul, I will give your land rain in season, autumn rain and spring, so that you may harvest your corn, your wine, your oil; I shall

> provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and have all you want.

Violation of this sacred partnership by the Israelites constitutes the fall in Isaiah's historical narrative. The judgment follows with promises of restoration. As might be expected of a writer addressing an eighth-century audience, Isaiah defines the guilt and assigns the cause, and sets forth the consequences in terms more readily recognizable by the modern reader than is the case with the Genesis story. In the latter, the nature of the moral transgression is articulated in mythical and metaphysical terms, is concerned with the very origin of the moral consciousness. By contrast, Isaiah ascribes the fall to idolatry and social injustice. Israel fell from divine favour because they turned to the worship of false gods and perpetrated social injustice: they oppressed the poor and the defenseless, perverted the cause of justice, and indulged themselves in luxury and dissipation. All these constituted a violation of the Mosaic covenant for which reason Yahweh allowed their land to be ravaged by war and the people themselves to be driven into exile.

For contemporary environmental ethics, the point of interest would be the correlation suggested between the perpetuation of social injustice and a state of the land made more convincing by tracing the etiology of social evil to its roots in individual psychology: greed, aggression, and love of luxury (Obilor et al, 2018; Njar & Enagu 2020). While commenting on Isa. 5 in *Wondrous Depth: Preaching the Old Testament* by E. Davis, for whom Isaiah is "hardly a facile optimist", illumines the scene:

> God exalted in judgment is indeed a hopeful image of the finiteness of evil- but for whom is it hopeful? On this point, Isaiah leaves us in no doubt at all. The judgment and justice of God is good news for the poor and powerless, who have been deprived of their right under the grip of evil… (2009, p. 142).

God's judgment is woe for the wealthy - and in Isaiah's terms, that would include most of us. Woe to us who call evil good. We call "healthy" a rapacious global economy that may succeed in growing our pension fund investments, yet at the same time the hope of the poor in this nation and countless others ebbs steadily - the hope of having decent homes and schools, unpolluted water and soil; hope that their children's lives will not be cut short by violence, distorted by drugs, frustrated by joblessness. Woe to us who call good evil, as the advertising industry has taught us to do, convincing us that taking no more than we need of the world's goods is not the good practice of temperance but rather the evil of deprivation…. Isaiah's "woes" confront us, who are not poor and powerless. Idolatry, too, could be reinterpreted to fit the behaviour patterns of a consumerist culture that makes a fetish of wealth and social status. After all, the point of prophetic denunciations of idolatry is that it gives to things of the created world, the veneration due to the creator.

The book of Isaiah contains references to an Eden-like dwelling as the hoped for the messianic ideal of harmony within the created order. These references function as a dramatic climax, contained within a reassuring narrative of resolution. Eden draws man and nature together in an organic unity, comprehends them in a single vision of the physical-spiritual, human-natural realms. To unpack the meaning of this paradisal image is to be aware that this is the Bible's picture of how human life ought to be lived. In the first place, the enclosed nature of the perfect garden suggests its difference from ordinary life. The simplicity of life in the Garden is the very antithesis of the

complexities of civilization. After the fall, the enclosure signifies a fixed barrier between original perfection- an ideal past- and a fallen experience. It may also imply the limits and finitude of human life even in its original perfection. Another motif is provision. As a well-watered place and a place of abundant vegetation, the garden is a picture of the perpetual abundance and nourishment of nature. Moreover, the green world is also a place of natural beauty. The abundant provision does not preclude the need for work. Adam is enjoined to till the garden and preserve it. The tree of life signifies the very principles of abundant life and growth. In this setting, the natural corollary of idealized growth is idealized work. Adam's labour is fulfilling for both himself and his environment. A major meaning of the image of paradise is harmony. Adam and Eve live in harmony with nature and also with each other. They also enjoy unfettered communion with God. Two further motifs set this garden apart from the classical conception of earthly paradise. It is not a place of inviolable retirement, but a place of continuous moral testing as indicated by the presence of the forbidden tree. Related to this is the motif of the Garden as a place of radical choice. In fact, believers associate the original Garden with the most decisive choice in the history of the world. In brief, the Garden of Eden is a symbolic formulation of the complex issues involved in achieving and maintaining a good life. All the physical resources are there. It is man's task to make judicious use of them. He is free to cooperate, or not to co-operate with a divinely instituted order. The forbidden fruit is to serve as a sign, a warning, that this freedom, when exercised in violence as a manifestation of power, must entail tragic consequences.

This last aspect of the Garden image corresponds to the relentless insistence in Isaian prophecy on the observance of the terms of a covenanted relationship. It is made clear that the restoration promised will only come about if man recovers his covenant-loyalty and co-operates with the Spirit of the Lord. Only then will justice and righteousness prevail, "Then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remains in the fruitful field. And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever" (Isa.32.16-17). This passage may be compared with Isa. 11.3-9 which brings together the themes of a just society and an Eden-like harmony in the created order. What is particularly striking in both passages is the fusion of inner and outer worlds, of the social and natural order: "Right will dwell in the desert and justice abide in the orchard." Here is the core of Isaiah's ecological thinking, a conception of justice and righteousness that fuses together the world of man ("Right" and "Justice") and the world of nature ("Desert" and "Orchard"). Zion restored will come to embody the idea of a non-violent, inclusive world, like Eden, "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the LORD" (Isa.65.25). The term "all my holy mountain" indicates that the blessings promised are extended to all the people of the world, not to Israelites only. Under the new dispensation, nature, too, has her role changed. No longer a witness called to a covenant lawsuit against man, or an instrument of judgment or an invasive elemental force breaking the bounds of creation, personified nature, animate and conscious of her new role, accepts and rejoices in the order established by God "the LORD thy maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth" (Isa. 51.13). "The mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap [their] hands" (Isa. 55.12b).

CONCLUSION

The present study of the Book of Genesis and Isaiah explores, from a socio-ecological standpoint, the representation of the human-nature relationship and assesses its significance for contemporary ecological concerns. A detailed analysis of the Prophet Isaiah's narrative and rhetorical strategies was undertaken with a specific focus on the rendering of the environment. Given the author's anthropocentric bias, the human subsystem was bound to receive particular prominence and so attention was focused on how human beliefs and behavior impinged upon the environment. The findings of the inquiry address major contestations related to the Bible, and by extension, attempt to clarify Christianity's role in developing environmental ethics.

The onus of the study had been to examine the extent to which the Biblical book of Genesis and the eighth century Hebrew prophet's (Isaiah) understanding of human-nature relationship could be brought into effective relationship with current concerns in ecological thinking. A striking coincidence of views was discerned between the two contexts, particularly in the religious and sociological perceptions of human agency and responsibility for maintaining a healthy social and natural environment. Major plot-motifs of Isaiah's sacred narrative are a violation of covenant, judgment, exile, and redemption. The people of Israel have forsaken Yahweh and have gone after strange gods. On high places, under leafy trees they have erected sanctuaries for pagan deities; they have erected solar pillars and sacred poles where they offer worship and sacrifices. They have ceased to observe the Sabbath. These and the social crimes- corruption, luxury, and dissipation, oppression of the poor, perversion of justice- precipitate judgment which takes the form of the devastation of land in war, exile and captivity. After they have gone through the ordeal of exile, the faithful "remnant" are redeemed and restored to their *land*.

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