

Decolonizing and Reassembling the Voice of John's Gospel in a time of Ecological Crisis

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Abstract

The effects of ecological problems faced by earth's habitants have recently been described as "... an ecological Armageddon" (Dave Goulson, 2017). The impacts of climate change are already being felt. In particular, the harmful effects of climate change have resulted in an unprecedented ecological crisis in recent times that have not only affected countries across the globe but also threatened the existence of planet earth. Climate change is as a result of human misuse of the natural world and many schools of thought are arguing for ecological and climate change adaptation (Mark Pelling, 2011). This paper argues that it is not too late to reverse the effects of human activity on the ecology. In aligning itself with multi-sectoral approaches being sought for an eco-friendly existence, this paper puts John's Gospel to accountability and the Bible by extension for the way in which it has colonised the ecosystem. Furthermore, it adds a biblical voice into the whole debate by retrieving the voice of the Johannine Jesus in the backdrop of an ecological crisis. Johannine Jesus is presented as the saviour of the "whole world" (John 4:42) and this world can be saved. Towards this end, the paper employs a postcolonial biblical criticism to reveal the usefulness of John's gospel in eco-friendly discourse which offers biblical conceptualisations for mitigating effects of climate change. The findings of this paper with express certainty function to assist in capacity building among stakeholders by presenting the Johannine Jesus' model for a balanced ecosystem.

Key Words: *Bible, Biblical, Climate change, Ecology, Environment, Jesus, John's Gospel Postcolonial,*

Introduction

Earth is facing an environmental crisis. This crisis threatens the very life of the planet. The atmosphere we breathe is being polluted. The forests that generate the oxygen we need to survive are being depleted at a rapid rate. Fertile soils needed to provide food are being poisoned by salinity and pesticides. Waters that house organisms essential to the cycle of life are being polluted by chemicals and waste. Global warming has become a frightening threat and the list goes on.

According to Norman C. Habel (2000, p.27) “the depth and danger of this ecological crisis are well documented in reputable scientific sources”. A perusal of many academic and scientific sources will reveal that the earth’s ecological crisis is so pervasive, destructive and insidious that academics, biblical scholars, theologians and religious practitioners can no longer ignore it. A close consideration of how biblical scholars have interpreted the Bible reveals a strong tendency to ignore or even devalue the earth. Although not all approaches take such a detour, such approaches are enshrined in a historical critical method whose primary attention is exegesis (See for example Keener Craig, 2016). Most of such readings have had their basis on the Bible’s declaration right from Genesis 1 & 2 (a trajectory that runs through the Bible) that human beings are superior to and should have dominion over other creation and mandate to harness the earth.

The current ecological crisis that threatens the existence and flourishing of the natural ecosystem is largely human made and unless checked it may lead to catastrophic consequences. Whereas humanity has ability to conserve and protect the natural ecosystem, human activities have been key in destroying and destabilizing its beauty and value.

In retaliation, the natural ecosystem has protested this ill treatment as evidenced in harsh climatic conditions and a general degradation of its quality. For instance, some water bodies are drying up

and others are already dried up completely, hence endangering lives that thrive in water. Similarly, humanity struggle to survive amidst unpredictable and at times catastrophic weather patterns. It is therefore important that a biblical voice is mainstreamed in the conversations towards mitigating these harmful consequences and consideration on proposals regarding better environmental care.

The task of this paper is to use John's gospel in order to provide a rationale in which a reversal of ecological restoration can be imagined. This is a realization that relatively adequate debates have been championed through the synoptic gospels but insufficient debates have emanated from the fourth gospel. Again the choice of John over other gospels is informed by the unique way in which it introduces Jesus as the Word (Logos) in 1: 1-4, 14. The *Word* is equated with the Creator God and also with the Son – Jesus - who embodies new creation in God's restorative work among humanity.

To attain this, this paper begins by a general assessment of the Bible's usability in ecological debates. Next it attempts an ecological introduction to John's gospel and later inserts the voice of John's Jesus into the debate. A decolonization of his voice is done in view of the fact that the text is a product of the empire and it still retains imperial codes that are detrimental to the ecosystem.

The language of retrieval applied to Johannine Jesus' voice is a recognition that the author of John's gospel does not set out to carve an ecological portrait of Jesus but such an image can only be retrieved and reassembled and made usable for purposes of addressing the current ecological crisis.

The conclusion of this paper offers prophetic imaginations of how the text and by extension the Bible can be harnessed for ecological debates. The ultimate argument is that among the gospels,

the voice of the Johannine Jesus is an authoritative and useful model for engaging an ecological world agenda.

Biblical Ambivalence and Eco-Language

In many cases the Bible is ambivalent and ambiguous in terms of its ecological perspective. Likewise many biblical interpretations have taken this ambivalent hue. Some texts are quite problematic for an ecological perspective for example those that present humanity as superior to other creation and always tend to depict a future cosmic collapse while others contain a more positive ecological concept for example those that stress the inclusion of all creation in God's saving purposes. For example some texts in Pauline epistles view salvation only in terms of humanity. There are texts in the book of Revelation that depict ultimate salvific acts in terms of throne and temple business. Some of Jesus' parables also confine salvation to human redemption and not creation redemption. However it is important to note the voice of David C. Horrell (2010, p.117) who in engaging a similar debate points out that, even the texts that seems to offer an eco-friendly biblical voice and are favourite among eco-theologians still retain an ambivalence and uncertainty than is more often presumed.

The difficulty raised in this observation is the complexity concerning the Bible in other postcolonial readings. Given its imperial origins which are more often than not about people and power, the Bible is quite ambivalent and can be used to support two opposing viewpoints.

For example, the Bible was used to support nineteenth century slavery and it was also used to abolish it, it was used to sustain South African apartheid and also used to bring it to an end; moreover, the Bible was seen to favour a patriarchal construction of life and later became very useful in counter-readings of patriarchy. Therefore, if the Bible is so double-tongued, how can it

play a positive role in shaping Christian thinking about environment and shaping human responsibility towards it?

What can be noted therefore is that despite much exegetical energy expended in attempts to demonstrate the correct or more plausible reading of a given text, biblical texts (at least hermeneutically speaking) are open to a range of readings and have been read so throughout Christian history. This vulnerable position of the text means that a Christian theology of a human only world and human only heaven (whether possible or not) can be sustained by use of the text. Moreover in the ensuing debate it can be argued that a very anti-ecological reading of the Bible is possible as well as a very eco-friendly reading of the same. We can use the text to resist contemporary ecological agenda and we can also use the same to retrain a trajectory of eco-friendly readings. The point is that in as much as a careful and attentive reading of the scripture is necessary in ecological debates, the Bible alone is not sufficient. The *Sola scriptura* slogan does not suffice for a sustainable contribution to ecological debate. Therefore, the voice of the Bible however ambivalent remains a useful ingredient among other ingredients. It is a discipline in a multidisciplinary race. As Horrell (2010, p.121) puts it, we should be “using biblical or theological terms so as to facilitate dialogue with biologists, ecologists and other religious traditions... and scientists”.

Synoptic Gospels and Othering of Creation

It is not expressly clear why early biblical studies presented few perspectives in so far as the ecological dimensions of the synoptic gospels were concerned. However, from the eighties several voices have been focussed on the ecological dimensions of the synoptic gospels yielding interesting viewpoints (See for instance, Robert Faricy, 1982; Andrain Leske, 2002 and William Loader, 2002). An interesting point from such studies is that synoptic gospel’s ecological thought

can be deciphered through the lens of the world they describe. In particular, the gospels map “micro-ecologies that distinguish three regions of Galilee – Lower (including Nazareth), the valley (including Capernaum and the lakeside) and upper (including Caesarea Philippi)” (Sean Freyne, 2004, p.2). These spaces also map different modes of human interaction with different opinions about the natural world.

A close reading of the synoptic Gospels from such viewpoints reveals that the characters mentioned together with Jesus as the most prominent actor operated within a world that was rich in fauna and flora. In the gospels, several animals are mentioned (for example dogs, donkeys, camels, foxes et cetera), various types of trees and plants are mentioned (fig tree, mustard plant, thorn, wheat, vine et cetera), methods of living are mentioned (for example, shepherding, hunting, netting bird, agriculture et cetera), references to weather patterns and their bearing on general life are also made.

Most of these actually are even employed to make sense of Jesus teachings. This not only indicates the synoptic Jesus’ closeness to the natural world, but also reveals the gospel writers familiarity to this kind of natural setting and world.

The most interesting aspect of the synoptic gospels in so far as eco-language is concerned, is the way they persistently use eco-language to portray the Kingdom of God. The cosmic scope of the Kingdom is also included in the synoptic teaching of the Lord’s Prayer, “your Kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matt 6:9-10). As Richard Bauckham (2011, p.72) has put it, “the Kingdom does not come to extract people from the rest of creation, but to renew the whole creation in accordance with God’s perfect will for it”.

However, having said this we can mention authoritatively that in spite of all this rich eco-debate embedded in the synoptic gospels, the swipe is more on the human side than an argument for a

balanced ecosystem. In other words the „lower“ creation is accorded secondary status and is depicted in subservient terms for the sake of the dominant and hegemonic life. In postcolonial terms, the voice of the other has been silenced and submerged and only disappears and reappears to serve the dominant existence. It is no wonder then that the synoptic gospels do not relinquish this arrangement and to the end they paint an eternity that neglects the lower creation.

Postcolonizing and Ecologizing John’s Gospel

Postcolonizing biblical interpretation in the backdrop of ecological crisis is considered urgent and indispensable. While postcolonial readings of the Bible seek to situate colonialism and imperialism at the centre of biblical interpretation (Jeremy Punt, 2015), they also seek to

“investigate them for colonial assumptions, imperial impulses, power relations, hegemonic intentions, the treatment of subalterns, stigmatization of women and the marginalized, land appropriation and violation of minority cultures [*and their environments*]” (R. S. Sugirtharajah, 2006, p.67).

Even though John’s gospel is not primarily an ecological document, the employment of postcolonial criticism to its strategy helps retrieve and amplify ecological allusions therein. A closer look at John will make this more explicit.

A key consideration in reading John’s gospel through a postcolonial optic is to ascertain if such an exercise is plausible. In his postcolonial introduction to John, Fernando F Segovia (2009, p.157) reveals that the Gospel of John has played a rather prominent role in postcolonial biblical criticism particularly in the works of Musa Dube (1988) and Musa Dube & Jeffrey Staley (2002). Segovia’s conclusion after analysis of these works is that the gospel is a writing in which a postcolonial problematic is both prominent and pervasive. The Gospel of John does not clearly

belong in a literal way to the colonized and colonizing world; rather it belongs to John's spatial and virtual reality (John's imaginary world).

However, in as much as it belongs to John's spatial and virtual reality, it also belongs to the real physical world in which John writes from. It is a late first century text and its world is dominated by imperial power. It is equally noteworthy that John is not a centrist, hegemonic or Western text that originates with the powerful and that performs their tasks of creating representations of the other, with which postcolonial work is so concerned.

Postcolonizing and ecologizing John must therefore pay attention to its ecological voice that represents the virtual world and its ecological voice that resounds with the realities of the first century milieu which it represents. For this reason, John's gospel must be exposed to postcolonial criticism for investigation of imperial social formation and cultural productions and especially those that point to an ecological real or at least an ecological palimpsest embedded in it. The main object of the aforementioned endeavour is grounded in the fact that "John is expressed as a product of the interaction of imperial culture and local cultural experience and practices" (Segovia, 2009, p.160). Added to this, is the fact that the gospel also offers experiences of life lived on the margins produced through the imaginations of one who was also a margin harvested by the Jesus movement from the shores of Galilee. The gospel is also seen as produced by the voices of a seemingly subaltern community and many scholars have answered the question of origin through this dimension, John represents diverse viewpoints.

Until subjected to a postcolonial hermeneutical key, readings in John's gospel may retain the innocence of religious literature and yield modicum attention. However, exposure to postcolonial scrutiny can dispel such innocence whereby John becomes another text of the empire with all its shortcomings; (anti-ecology included). The complexity and uniqueness of John's gospel cannot

be overstated in such enquiry. If under postcolonial optic the Gospel of John can be viewed as a text that uses the matrix of power to pass the point, then it can also be viewed as an eco-ambivalent text that „others“ creation by maintaining a purely human agenda in its trajectory. Even when it alludes to or yields to ecological discourse it may not be without express difficulty.

“Greening” John’s Gospel

As has been alluded to, relatively few voices have been aligned to the Gospel of John for the purposes of ecological readings. In such readings, John’s Jesus has almost always been presented in scholarship as “saviour of the world” whereby world could be read as (*λαός*) *laos* (people). In such readings, salvation of the world only represents humanity; those he refers to in his contrast language of light and darkness. In so far as postcolonialism is concerned John has been read for other purposes. For example, Dube (1988) has read John for decolonization concentrating only on John as travel narrative and basing it on 4:1-42. What is at stake in postcolonial scholarship of John is that it has not been interpreted as a gospel that resists imperial cosmopolitan centers in the way it acknowledges the serene spaces offered by Judean and Galilean county sides. A closer look at John’s gospel reveals a rich and embedded ecological world which sustains the world that holds John’s concepts together ensuring that his narration makes sense. In other words John’s

Gospel is foiled in ecological language and imagery; without an ecologically sound world the Johannine Jesus could not have made any point in his teaching. Loader (2014) has presented a good argument for John’s co-option into the ecological agenda. In his view, Loader resists readings of John 3:16 that exclude nature from the famous “God so loved the world” missionary statement. In part Loader argues,

... while “the world” here means the world of people, the world of creation is not something awful let alone evil which one has to endure, but the handiwork of the Logos, the Word. While the focus in John is primarily on eternal life as sharing God’s life in

relationship with Jesus and with one another, and nowhere returns to the themes of the first verses, these verses set the frame of reference for all that follows.

Eternal life is to be lived and shared not despite the reality of creation but within it. Its reality inspires images which celebrate that life (2014, p23).

Loader's point is that albeit in-explicitly so, all creation is envisaged in John's salvific and redemptive language and it is part of his ecological concerns.

In a similar manner, Fidon R. Mwombeki (2001) in his analysis of John 1:1-4 and John 10:10, argues against interpreting Christ in solely anthropocentric terms. He avers that Christ is the source of life of all creation since he is the life. He further explains that in John's gospel "life is not simply natural, but quality real existence in the realm of God". The quality of life has however been adversely affected due to various activities that are destructive to the environment. Subsequently Christ reconciles the whole world, and not only humans, to God by giving quality abundant life.

Another significant writing in this regard is by V. J. John (2004) who adds to the debate by citing that "it seems that there is another feature of Johannine Jesus' language which has not received adequate attention. This has to do with Jesus' use of concepts and images which have reference to nature" John's argument catalogues all metaphors that John incorporates and interprets them within an ecological aspect. These metaphors include Water, light, wind, grain of wheat, harvest, vine and branches. This means that the Johannine Jesus can be construed as celebrating creation by enjoining such metaphors. Moreover, it can also be added that when the Johannine Jesus in one of the seven I AMs (John 14:6) refers to himself as the life, it can mean that his Christological works which symbolize life, and wellness, are enshrined in a balanced natural world and they further help foster the vision of the new life that the gospel presents.

Another reading of the Johannine Jesus' voice in view of ecology can be retrieved from his use of the water metaphor. Very early in his first miracle, the Johannine Jesus is seen as using the

water of purification as the symbol of new life that Israel has been waiting for. Although there are many exegetical commentaries to this first miracle, an observation can be made that such interpretations are imperialized in the way that they represent the hegemonic human voice by using water as means to celebrate human life and not human life as celebrating nature. Such interpretations serve the interests of presupposing imperial humanity. Further, the Gospel of John in chapter four presents the discourse of Jesus with the Samaritan woman in a supposedly serene environment. The availability of water underscored in this discourse presupposes a very balanced ecosystem. It is this water that John uses in order to sustain his theological point through the interaction of Jesus with the Samaritan woman. In chapter five John brings up another imagery of water and this time in a very interesting way. The Johannine Jesus presents water in its medicinal value by commanding a blind man to go and wash in the pool of Siloam so as to regain his wellness. Baukham (2011, p.65) has mirrored the command to the blind man to wash in the pool of Siloam (John 9:7) to Elijah's command to Naaman to wash in the Jordan (2Kings 5:10).

John's Gospel Green Trajectory

As has been mentioned, John's gospel has an explicitly stated salvific theme that is tied to high creation. This main theme dominates in such a way that it cannot be easily distracted by other themes. Although it can be noted that there are instances when John conjoins nature to relate his salvific narrative, the die is cast in that this creation is not envisaged in his futuristic dimensions of existence. For example John regularly mentions light and although light is primary source plant recreation in photosynthesis and perfectly aids the food chain, his reference to light is not with a direct allusion to the environment. Light is not depicted as an agent of beautifying nature but an indication of a sinless life.

It is indispensable to further note that John's gospel is rich in natural images. The images depict both a natural environment that is friendly and peaceful to humanity and also one that seems to resist human activity. A more nuanced scrutiny of John's eco-language trajectory stands to represent the ecosystem as John understood it and to buttress this point.

Beginning with John's prologue in 1:1, it can be noted that John overtly equates the Word with God and further describes the Word as the agent of creation. In 1:23 reference is made to wilderness an aspect that implies that John was aware of arid places. John was also aware of human activity in nature when he symbolically tells the disciples to "make way for the Lord". In the Jesus and Nicodemus dialogue (3:8) the blowing of wind is mentioned. This statement alludes to a succinct familiarity with the natural world. In 3:23, it is related that John the Baptist baptised at Aenon where there was much water. The Samaritan woman and Jesus' discourse in 4: 7-15 underscores the importance of water as an inevitable and valuable commodity. Symbolically, Jesus deviates from the discourse to the „water of life“ which is beside the point.

A pool is mentioned in 5:2 and 6:1. The later reference which is made within the narration of Jesus feeding five thousand men also entails the description of the place as having a lot of grass. That the place could accommodate at least five thousand people out rightly alludes to a vast grassed lawn. In a parallel narration of the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6, the grass that accommodated the people is further described as green. In John 9 where the healing of the man born blind is related, Jesus heals the man by spitting on the ground to make mud which he applies on the man's eyes and then orders him to go and wash at the sea of Siloam. Jesus here is depicted as incorporating aspects from an affable nature to heal the man.

John also makes use of natural food metaphors. This use points to a land of sufficiency from agricultural produce. Agricultural plenty is only capable where humanity and nature co-exist in

harmony. Therefore, John's world is a world of plenty; there is enough bread (John 6:11), enough fish and the sea is filled with plenty (John 6:11). Furthermore, there is the mention of several natural food metaphors; among these are the grain of wheat (12:24), and the vine (15: 1-7). In 4:35, Jesus metaphorically refers to fields that are ripe for harvest, yet again incorporating imagery from nature. In John 19:4, it is related that when Jesus was sentenced to crucifixion following his trial before Pilate, he wore a crown of thorns. 19: 41 further records that there was a garden in the place where he was crucified.

In his self-disclosure in the gospel, Jesus uses seven „I AM“ statements. These statements contain allusions that can be incorporated in the green talk. These are; “I am the true vine” (15:1), “I am the way, the truth and the life” (14:6), “I am the door of the sheep” (10:7), “I am the bread of life” (6:35), “I am the light of the world” (8:12), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), and “I am the good shepherd” (10:11). These statements embody the motifs of life, restoration and abundance all of which are central in environmental care. Alleviation of wastage is also alluded to in the feeding of the five thousand with bread and fish. After the people had had enough, Jesus instructed his disciples to gather the left over pieces to ensure that nothing was wasted (6:12).

However, there is also evidence of hostile nature in John's gospel. John 6:18 relates the reality of strong wind in the sea. Strong sea winds can be occasioned by nature protest.

While considering all the four gospels, Jonathon Porritt (1984, p.77) underscores the portrayal of Jesus as “the One who can uniquely overcome the forces of chaos that are constantly threatening to disturb the natural world, and in particular as the one who can subdue ... the sea”. In addition, the mention of Jacob's well in 4:6 implies the necessity for boreholes. The presence of boreholes should imply hostile environment such that human activity endorses struggle with nature to get

that needed commodity. Within this discourse, Jesus yet again avails himself as the solution in his promise of provision of “living water” (4:10).

Voicing John’s Jesus for Ecological Debates

Christianity is influential and John presents such part of influential Christian literature and heritage. Why John presents his Jesus as saviour of the whole world (4:42) and more often than not betrays a limited concept of that world by construing it to mean only humanity is understandable. Although John’s Gospel in a few instances uses cosmos to refer to the whole creation however, it is not surprising that cosmos in John’s Gospel is in many instances used to denote the world of humanity. This is especially evident in this verse (4:42) where savior of humanity is implied and not of cosmos in creation sense.

The redemption of such colonial texts is to subject them to a critique of their deficiencies but more importantly to coerce them to speak the language which they either never knew or otherwise deliberately silenced. It is important to understand early gospel writers as fresh writers who though inspired, exemplify limitation by their own theologies and themes. A critique of scripture in such a way does not mean resignation nor does it mean re-writing. It only means re-interpretation in light of our realities. If the gospel is to remain eco-relevant to generations, then it must be read again and again and aligned to issues that each generation grapples with.

However, and as Hall Harris (2017) has pointed out, it must be noted that “John used terms like *logos*, *kosmos*, *light*, and *darkness* in his own day to deliberately invoke broad cultural, philosophical, and religious associations for his readers which he could then define more specifically in his own terms in the contexts in which he used them”.

Absence of a strong and direct ecological voice from the saviour of the whole world as presented by John does not mean Jesus never willed redemption of nature. Jesus is not just the one who

cursed trees to dry (Mark 14), but was also the one who calmed strong winds (Mark 4) that threatened destruction of creation. For this reason grains of wheat (John 12:24) must fall to the ground and bring forth life, light must continue to shine (John 8:12), wind must blow wherever it wills (John 3:8) without obstruction, and living waters (John 4:14) must similarly continue to sustain abundant life. In other words the world is created by the Jesus who is the Logos and is totally subject to his control. At incarnation Christ as Logos expressed his love for the world. He incarnated in order to restore it in its entirety – including the natural ecosystem.

By becoming incarnate in the Logos, God “showed his desire to perfect and to draw up into himself not just human beings but the whole of his wonderful creation” (Porritt, 1984, p.87). Despite the vagueness and imprecision of this overall debate in so far as the Gospel of John and ecology is concerned, a number of parameters can nonetheless be discerned. First is a word on the literature; it largely deals with western imperial methodologies and most assuredly silences other creation for the sake of the salvation of the world which as I have argued is more often than not synonymous with humanity in the Gospel of John.

When this focus remains un-critiqued, then the gospel becomes its own worst critique for it loses a special dimension of the “beginning” in Genesis, the very language it co-opts in its opening—namely redemption of creation in its entirety and not humanity alone. Second and attuned to the first parameter is the colonizing way in which John’s gospel treats creation. For this it needs to be decolonized. John’s Jesus needs also to be “saviour of the whole world” John 4:42. Finally, in a limiting space that is John’s spatial and real world, humanity and creation needs to be brought into dialogue, perhaps to be reconciled. The voice of nature which is quite silenced in John’s gospel or used to run the human hegemonic script needs to be reassembled and placed in the lips of his key characters, and particularly Jesus as is the case for this paper. Reading for

decolonization therefore depicts John as a highly tilted gospel whose insistent theme overlooks spaces and whose startling character misses out on such an important function.

The reassembled voice of the Johannine Jesus lucidly fits in the green talk. For the African continent whose populace continue to destroy the environment variously; yet at the same time suffer the harsh consequences of a degraded environment, Jesus' reassembled voice demands apt action towards mitigating harmful and degrading activities against the environment. In the backdrop of the reality of climate change and its adverse effects, this voice facilitates the green talk towards care for creation in its entirety – humanity and the natural ecosystem – since creation is inter-connected and neglect or dilapidation of one aspect endangers it all. The voice is an active response to goal 13 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals which is centred on the requisite to “take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”.

Conclusion

The heart of the biblical message is the salvation of humanity as evidenced in God's working through humanity and their experiences to accomplish this. This aim is ultimately accomplished in the incarnation. Jesus, the incarnate God, is the *Word* and God in John's gospel. For our current climate reality, this salvation is truly realised when all creation is incorporated and not just humanity. Through reassembling the voice of the Gospel of John within the postcolonial framework, a biblical voice has been added in response to the indispensable need to act responsibly towards nature.

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