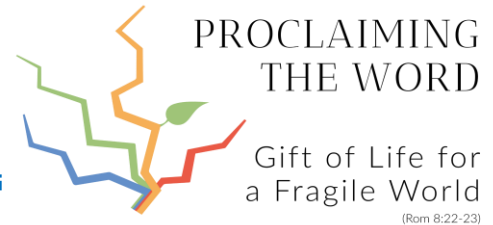


DOCUMENTS

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Socio-Environmental Fragility

Reading Rom 8:18-23 from a Ghanaian Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The topic entrusted to me is ‘Socio-environmental fragility’, which you will agree with me cuts across several academic disciplines and thus could be discussed from many angles. But in line with the CBF goals, I will approach the theme from a biblical theological perspective within the frame of African biblical hermeneutics.

It is common knowledge that social and environmental crises have always been part of human history from creation through the various ages. For this reason, God from the very beginning has entrusted human society and creation into the care of humans (cf. Gen 2: 4bff). The fall and human frailty in general have rendered this task difficult. Even after Jesus’ redemptive work on the cross, humans still need the grace of transformation mediated by the Church, the fragile body of the redeemer.

As Serena Noceti has explained, “fragility points to a reality marked by the possibility of a rupture, which might occur due to an increasing burden or a certain jolt at a precise point.” That which can break because it is weak, vulnerable, delicate is fragile. Thus, social relationships and environmental connections by their natures are fragile.

In recent times, the fragility of the social order and the environment have gained the attention of the academic community as well as world political leaders and religious leaders. The many wars in different parts of the world, for example in Ethiopia, Sudan, Congo, Burkina Faso, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine, and Ukraine in the past year, have led to the loss of many lives. All of these have created serious instabilities and massive immigration of people leading to fragile relations. Furthermore, epidemics such as HIV-AIDs and Ebola and Cholera outbreaks in Africa have also claimed many lives and left devastating effects on human society. Recently the COVID-19 pandemic shook all nations and revealed the porous and fragile nature of human existence. Its effects are evident in the financial crises and near collapse of the economies of many countries, especially poorer nations.

Amid all of these, the issue of climate change, largely caused by human activities, many times motivated by inappropriate political decisions, greed, and corruption has resulted in various environmental

crises – drought, flooding, pollution of water bodies, air, sea, deforestation, desertification, bush fires. Thus, not only the social order but the fragile environment cries for relief. But to be relieved by who? God? Or human beings? Or both?

Depending to whom the above question is addressed, the answer may be the political leaders, governments, religious leaders or the Church. As a Catholic Biblical theologian, and taking inspiration from Pope Francis and his encyclical *Laudato Si*, and in fact earlier Papal teachings, I am tempted to answer that the call is to all humanity, with the Church to play the leadership role of the voice of the voiceless. The Church is, in fact, to be the voice of ‘wailing humans as well as the non-human created order’. In 2005, Pope Benedict XVI has already affirmed this at the beginning of his Pontificate when he states:

And there are so many kinds of deserts. There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God’s darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore, the earth’s treasures no longer serve to build God’s Garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction. The Church as a whole and all her pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance.

As members of the Catholic Biblical Federation, one fundamental question we ought to ask ourselves is, how can the Christian Scriptures guide the socio-ecological conversion which the Popes, especially the Holy Father, Pope Francis continually reminds us about?

Notably, the problem of the environment is a relative newcomer in biblical studies. It all started with the publication of an article on ecology by Lynn White Jr. in 1967 . After this seminal paper, OT and NT scholars began exploring the Christian Scriptures to discuss ecological issues. However, the ecological reading of the Pauline letters was first proposed by the Ecological Hermeneutics Project, initiated in the context of the Society of Biblical Literature annual conferences , from which was borne the Earth Project and the Exerter Project.

One of the frequently cited texts is Rom 8:18-23, where Paul affirms nature’s worth as humanity’s partner in the redemptive work of Christ. No wonder Pope Francis offered the v. 22 at the beginning of his encyclical *Laudato Si*’ as the document’s hermeneutic key.

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22).

Though several commentators have offered insightful contributions to this text, a re-reading in different contexts (Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe) always produces fresh and new insights. Furthermore, as Pope Francis has repeatedly affirmed, biblical and theological reflections should not only listen to but also become the voice of the ‘groaning earth’, given that environmental issues are global and determine the future of creation at large. That is why, the ‘mystical’ body of Christ, the Church, which continues the mission of Christ in our world in every age has to tirelessly proclaim the love of God in creation.

It is against this background, that I propose to read Rom 8:18-23 in its literary and socio-cultural context to establish how the theme of environment, the redemption of non-human creation, fit into the letter's purpose and offer a Christian response to the ecological crises that have plagued the world, with special reference to Ghana.

To achieve this objective, the first part of my contribution explores the passage's literary and cultural/ideological contexts to highlight various narrative and thematic links and ideological issues relevant to interpretation, while the second part examines the text's syntactic and semantic composition to understand its communicative function and perlocutionary effect. In the last part, I will illustrate the impact of an ecological reading of the text for the Christian community that lives in the Ghanaian context, which may apply to other regions of the world far away from mine.

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS

Here is an English translation of the passage that we are examining:

"¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now."

In his article, *An Ecological Reading of Rom 8:19-22: Possibilities and Hesitations*, Bredan Byrne has pointed out how this passage enhances hermeneutical possibilities within the broader context of Paul's letter to the Romans. In other words, to examine the ecological perspectives of our passage, we ought to verify their resonance in the argumentative context of the entire letter. Several authors have explored this approach to arrive at interesting results. For example, Robert Jewett studied Rom 8:18-22 by discussing the idea of the destruction and redemption of creation within the context of Roman imperial ideology.

The main stimulating aspect of this approach is the discovery of thematic links among the various themes of the letter and the discussion on how all contribute towards achieving the communicative purpose of the letter. Interpreters of Romans agree that the letter's central and programmatic theme, namely, God's righteousness of salvation and the Gospel's power, was announced in 1:16-17. Whatever theme Paul develops, he links it to 'salvation' as the revelation of God's gratuitous love. While the Adam story brought corruption of sin, faith in Christ brings redemption (cf. 3:9-21). In adhering to Christ, believers receive justification (cf. 5:9-10).

After the long discourse on the law of 'sin and death' (chapters 6 and 7), Rom 8 opens with a reflection on the "Spirit of life" (vv. 1-17), which precedes our passage. This pericope reiterates the central point: the graciousness of God is made manifest in Jesus Christ – "he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit who dwells in you" (8:11).

In Rom 8:18-23, Paul expands the horizon to include in the beneficiaries of God's salvation all creation, namely, non-humans. Appropriating prophetic and apocalyptic language, he attests vigorously how the entire created order awaits redemption in Jesus Christ. From this hope of redemption springs forth

the call to the Christian community to practice justice in relating to God, the other and the entire creation (cf. Rom 9-16).

Our passage is set in a context where Paul directs his readers' attention to the hope that awaits them (cf. Rom 5:1-5) and then immediately focuses on the phenomenon of suffering (cf. Rom 8:18). In three brief pericopes characterised by the repetition of the same lexical root, στενάζ (vv. 22; 23) and στεναγμοῖς (v. 26), he analyses the groaning that comes from all creation: non-humans (vv. 19-22), humans (vv. 23-25) and even the Spirit (vv. 26-27). While waiting for the 'not yet', the community's suffering should be read with hope, contemplating the glory 'ahead' to be revealed in the future. The section concludes by reiterating God's salvific plan (vv. 28-30).

Given the fact that the entire letter is about 'salvation', and it is only in 8:18-30 that Paul suggests both humans and non-humans as beneficiaries or subjects of God's righteousness this text stands out uniquely for analysing Paul's thinking on the redemptive work of Christ. But what does it mean for non-humans to be liberated from suffering?

SUFFERING AND GLORY: A COMMON DESTINY

The v. 18 has an introductive value. Paul contrasts the τὰ παθήματα (suffering) of the present against the δόξαν (glory) to be revealed (ἀποκαλυφθῆναι). Paul had already dealt with the theme in the preceding chapters. He demonstrated that suffering became the human condition due to the disobedience of Adam - αὐχώμεθα ἐν ταῖς θλίψεσιν, εἰδότες ὅτι ἡ θλίψις ὑπομονὴν κατεργάζεται, ἡ δὲ ὑπομονὴ δοκιμὴν, ἡ δὲ δοκιμὴ ἐλπίδα (Rom 5:3-4). However, as Byrne has pointed out "The logical flow in the sequence making up the first 'groaning' passage is not all that obvious at first glance". Many scholars have also noted the syntactic and semantic ambiguities in the entire passage, which largely affect the passage's interpretation. For example, what does Paul mean by κτίσεως (creation)? Is it an inclusive term (human and non-humans) or it refers only to non-humans?

The debate on an inclusive meaning and a restrictive sense has continued for many years. However, considering the authoritative assertive context of the passage, we accept the reasons for those who maintain a restrictive meaning of the term. Therefore, non-human creation should be understood as the subject that 'is waiting with eager longing' (ἀπεκδέχεται), that 'was subjected to futility' (ὑπετάγη), hoping that it 'will be set free' ἐλευθερωθήσεται (cf. 19-21). The verses' temporal structure suggests a past, present and future status, which resonates with God's intervention per his salvific plan. The past and present status of creation is subjection to futility (ματαιότης). We find in this an allusion to the second account of creation in Gen 2:4b - 3:24, where the consequence of Adam's sin is the curse of the earth (cf. Gen 3: 17-19). Despite the literal meaning of ματαιότης as purposelessness, emptiness, devoid of meaning, it is not very clear what Paul intends to express with the term. However, considering Paul's use of the term in other places in his letters (cf. Rom 1: 21; Eph 4:17), Byrne suggests that futility should be interpreted as a human failure, which frustrates creations' true purpose. As it were, creation was emptied of its meaning by its condemnation to decay and destruction. Human activity or inactivity in the environment hurts and degrades creation. From this cosmic suffering springs forth the groaning of creation for liberation.

With the emphatic use of the syntagm οἶδαμεν γὰρ ὅτι, 'we know that' (8:22), Paul seems to appeal to knowledge that he can reasonably presume his readers share to push down his arguments. Though most interpreters refer to the story of the fall (Gen 3:17-19) as the basis of Paul's affirmation, other

scholars think that the interpretative background should include the prophetic conception of the cosmic alliance. For the oppression of the 'brother' provokes God's judgement not only on the humans responsible but also on the entire creation: "In the prophets, on the other hand, we find the notion that the non-human creation as a whole suffers the effects of human sin and God's judgement on it."

With the literary genre of lamentation, the prophets describe the drama of creation using the metaphor of mourning, infertility, and divestment (cf. Isa 24:1-7; Jer 4:23-25; Hos 4:3; Zeph 1:2-3). Therefore, we could presume that though Paul did not offer detailed explanations, his original readers would understand Adam's plight and the entire creation together with God's curse because of their Jewish background (cf. Gen 3:17).

In vv. 22-23, Paul concludes his discourse on the suffering of creation and indicates how it co-suffers futility with human beings in anticipation of redemption. The verb συστενάζει (groan together) in v. 22 is the compound of the στενάζομεν (we ourselves groan ...) in v. 23. Later in v. 26, Paul uses the noun form of verb, στεναγμός 'sigh or groan.' With the use of στενάζομεν (we ourselves groan) and συστενάζει (groan together), Paul seems to place the present situation of human decay and suffering parallel to that of the non-human creation to underline the fact that both categories eagerly await their restoration.

Not only (οὐ μόνον δέ) does creation join in the 'eschatological groaning', but also it joins 'we ourselves' (ἡμεῖς καὶ αὐτοὶ) who groan 'in ourselves' (ἐν ἑαυτοῖς) in anticipation of our adoption as sons. The use of a common vocabulary to describe creation, humanity and the Spirit emphasises how they are all caught up in the same process, expecting the same outcome.

THE LIBERATION OF CREATION: WORK OF GOD OR HUMAN COLLABORATION?

Whereas Paul is specific about the restoration of humans - ἡμεῖς καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς στενάζομεν υἰοθεσίαν ἀπεκδεχόμενοι, τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν τοῦ σώματος ἡμῶν ('but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we await the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies': Rom 8:23), he is rather ambiguous about that of non-humans. Therefore, the hermeneutical questions are 'How are non-humans to be restored?' and 'What role do humans play in the liberation of creation?'

Our opinion is that the hope of the liberation of creation from subjection to futility, for Paul, is tied to human transformation achieved through the Christ event. The decay suffered because of Adam's disobedience and subjection to futility by God, which affected the whole created order, has been restored by the death and resurrection of Christ and will definitively be realised in the eschatological glory of Christ (cf. Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22). This transformation through the paschal mystery places a responsibility on humans to be stewards of creation until Christ returns and co-workers with God to bring new things into existence and establish new patterns of order in creation (cf. Rom 8:20).

As 'co-workers of God', believers are, first of all, to champion the creation of a just social, economic and political system where the rights and dignity of each human being will be respected. When individuals and the Church at large rediscover their mission and live their vocation in an authentic manner, gradually there will be harmony in creation.

CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES IN GHANA: A POSSIBLE JOURNEY?

At the end of our analysis, a question spontaneously arises: What educative principles does the letter to Romans offer Christians for ecological sensitivity? Because the context of a reader is an essential element in responding to God's word, I offer my response to the above question by examining the reality of Socio-environmental crises where I live and work, Ghana.

There is no doubt that socio-environmental crises have a devastating impact on Ghana. The Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference has repeatedly mentioned it in their annual communiques over the past decades:

If we think that at the turn of the century Ghana possessed about 90,000 hectares of forest and that this has been reduced to about 20,000 hectares, then we must realise that we are heading headlong towards environmental disaster. There is no doubt that eco-logical plunder is our number one problem, much more alarming than political or economic instability. With the destruction of the environment, our very survival is threatened.

The quote above acknowledges the fragility of the social, economic, and political systems as well as environmental crises. On the environmental front, we can note severe desertification, deforestation, and high population growth rates. In recent years, many have lamented the decreasing concern for preserving trees globally, especially in Africa.

Large portions of Ghana's arable lands have become deserts through human activities, such as galamsey, land grabbing, lack of sanitation and effective waste management, unsustainable fishing and farming, and several unmanaged mining site pits. Furthermore, due to the heavy reliance on wood for fuel and timbers for export, Ghana's forests holding important wood species, such as rosewood, and animals have diminished hugely.

Gati has rightly noted that "the degradation of the environment is one of the causes of growing poverty and the massive emigration of young people". The costs to the health and productive system are well documented. Attitude towards the land and environment directly or indirectly has resulted in several socio-economic and political crises. For example, indiscriminate mining activities have made many subsistence farmers poorer and few elite 'galamsayers' richer.

We need to note that while indigenous cultures have mechanisms for minimising and preventing exploitation and destruction of the earth in Ghana, with the arrival of Christianity, especially the Pentecostal and Charismatic waves, the picture changed drastically. For example, practices, such as avoiding farming or clearing land close to river bodies because of the sacredness of the rivers, and not farming in certain forest areas because they are the habitations of the gods, have all been interpreted as pagan by Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian preachers and Churches. Unfortunately, the respect for the sacredness of the land and environment inherent in the traditional religions has been abandoned or relegated to the background due to contradictory Christian witnessing. Gatti notes that

While the Historic Mission and some Classical Pentecostal Churches seek to integrate 'ecological conversion' into their pastoral programmes, many Charismatic and Prophetic Churches interpret the Bible as justification for the right to indiscriminate exploitation of resources and 'domination' over creation.

The 'prosperity gospel' theology of the Prophetic Churches educates adherents to exploit their environment for wealth because it is God's gift to them. Thus, it makes wealth the test of one's faith. Such a theological position, which undermines the value and independence of the non-created order,

has gradually gained a wider acceptance, deepening the fragility of the socio-economic and environmental systems.

Recognising the fragility of the Ghanaian socio-economic and political systems, the Christian Council of Ghana, the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, the National Association of Charismatic and Christian Churches, and the National Chief Imam's Office called the attention of all Ghanaians to the socio-environmental crises in the country and the need for change or transformation last year in a press conference. However, besides calling for a week of fasting and prayer, they did not, unfortunately, suggest for the citizens any transformative ethical behaviours for a responsible holistic human and community sustainable development. Pondering the frailty of the human condition and environmental degradation challenges us to explore how the word of God can become an educational tool.

CONCLUSION

An encounter with Romans should challenge Ghanaian Christian believers to rethink ways of living the justice of God that will impact the life of every Ghanaian, Christian and non-Christian alike. Ghanaian Christians should evaluate the values in the culture concerning the sacredness of non-human creation, which deserves respect and protection like humans. Furthermore, educated by Paul, the Christian can discover that all creation, human and non-human beings, are God's handiwork, destined for harmony but condemned to futility due to Adam's disobedience. Therefore, nature merits the same respect and protection as human beings. Like the original addressees of the letter, contemporary believers, Ghanaians, and non-Ghanaians ought to interpret the Christ event as the liberation of all creatures to restore the original project of God.

Lastly, the liberation of the created is a clarion call to responsibility and ethical commitment for all human beings to become collaborators of God in the care of our common home. The new condition of God's children in Christ is the stimulus to respect the environment and abstain from an unsustainable lifestyle.