



## Environmental Justice for Sustainable Development: A Biblical Perspective

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### Abstract

The growing awareness of environmental crisis has led to widespread religious reflection on the human relationship with the environment. After perceiving the goodness of the world that he had created, God created humanity in his own image. The perfectly created human being was placed in harmony with the world and was told to subdue it. Human beings were asked to rule and not to destroy the world. This implies that God placed the duty of Stewardship upon humanity. It is the role of humanity to preserve the environment. Genesis 1:27 clearly asserts that God created human beings and this is fundamental to environmental justice which affirms the social and economical right as well as environmental self determination. The basic assumption of this paper is that, environmental justice is the spring board for sustainable development. The researcher of this paper has seen to it that deforestation is devastating the environment, good arable land is eroding, streams are getting polluted or drying up and women have to go further to find ever-scarcer firewood in the rural areas. More to this people are fighting to lay their hands on gold, diamonds, silver, emeralds, ivory, petroleum and the like. All these constitute what we call environment. If people could learn to be in harmony with the environment, there will be environmental sustainability hence development. The goal of this paper is to argue that human beings were placed on this earth to maintain it and live in harmony with it. If people manage to be just to the environment then there will be peace in the world. The other basis of this paper is that the issue of environmental justice is Biblical and that human activities have an effect on the environment hence causing an imbalance in the ecosystem with no peace at all. The paper is based on Mathew 7:15-20 where Jesus talked about bearing good fruits through which God's people are recognised. This paper will suggest that we need to rethink our understanding of the relation of humanity to nonhuman nature and to develop a more adequate theology of nature for representing God's relation to the created order. This article intends to offer some biblical-theological considerations to be borne in mind in the ecological discussion. It does not deal with the practicalities of stewardship of the environment per se but suggests a framework within which that stewardship can be fostered. The article tries to raise the theology of environmental justice and see how it can help us to be just and peaceful in this world. The paper will argue that although the importance of individual action can't be overestimated, it will never solve a problem that is at heart. Until our profit-driven economies are redirected to take long-range effects into account, the earth will continue to be polluted and peace and justice will remain the words on the mouth but never achieved, practiced and cherished in human life. Book review and personal observations are going to be used to scrape together data for this paper.

### 1.0 Introduction

The growing awareness of environmental crisis has led to widespread religious reflection on the human relationship with the environment. After perceiving the goodness of the world that he had created, God created humanity in his own image. The perfectly created human being was placed in harmony with the environment and was told to subdue it. This implies that, God placed the duty of Stewardship upon humanity. When God created the universe, all the resources were in a perfect and complete state, under the care of humankind. God gave the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve for their recreation in addition to other resources. However, today the scenario looks pathetic to an extent that human beings can no longer rely on the same resources for their fulfilment. Due to numerous factors in opposition to one another, human beings through their selfish actions have blundered the rich resources meant for their comfort thus reducing themselves to a state of destitution. It is in light of this background that this paper intends to argue that, the Biblical environmental justice is the spring board for sustainable development. In other words, there is a significant relationship between God, humanity and the environment. Today deforestation is devastating the environment, good arable land is eroding, streams are getting polluted or drying up and women have to go further to find ever-scarcer firewood in the rural areas. More to this, people are fighting to lay their hands on gold, diamonds, silver, emeralds, ivory, petroleum and the like. All these problems can be put to an end if people could learn to be in harmony with the environment and there will be environmental sustainability hence development. If there is no peace between God and humanity, the earth or environment also suffers unjustly. So, we need to rethink our understanding of the relation of humanity to nonhuman nature and to develop a more adequate theology of nature for representing God's relation to the created order if we are to achieve sustainable development. This paper will kick off by defining key terms like environmental justice and sustainable development. Thereafter we discuss the concept of environmental justice in the light of the bible. The paper will end by giving recommendations on how we can manage the environment. Biblical hermeneutics, personal observations and book review were found appropriate for this study. The methods allowed the researcher to navigate the turbulent waters of environmental justice for sustainable development from a biblical perspective.

### 2.0 Definition of Key Terms

#### 2.1 Environmental Justice

Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies (Cole et al, 2001). Rather, environmental justice means everyone should have a safe and healthy place to live, work and play as well as making sure

that there are enough resources for all of us and the future generations. This implies that environmental justice can only be achieved when each one of us enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy and secure environment in which to live learn and work (Cole et al, 2001). There should be a fair treatment of the environment. No group of people should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, land use planning and zoning operations. Environmental justice promotes efforts to prevent pollution from impacting low income communities. Environmental justice has also been defined as an interdisciplinary body of social science literature that includes (but is not limited to) theories of the environment, theories of justice, environmental law and governance, environmental policy and planning, development, sustainability, and political ecology (Schlosberg, 2007).

The United States Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice (EJ) as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, sex, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies."

## 2.2 Sustainable development

Sustainable development has been defined as the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems (Agyeman, et al., 2003:5)

For Lucas (2004), sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Sustainable development builds development strategies to manage natural resources so that they provide for the needs of today while ensuring the resources of tomorrow. Sustainability is better seen as a measure of the relationship between the community as learners and their environments, rather than an externally designed goal to be achieved.

All too often sustainability is seen as an outcome, a tangible situation that we strive to define and arrive at rather than a process of planned change or managed learning. This process must involve the building of sustainable relationships between people and between people and their environment. To do this requires the development of learning societies capable of adapting to feedback, with improved abilities to improve decision making through the sharing of information and communication and understanding. At the 2005 World Summit, it was noted that this requires the reconciliation of environmental, social and economic demands – also known as the three pillars of sustainability. In general it is agreed to see sustainable development as a triangle "It is usually presented as the intersection between environment, society and economy, which are conceived of as separate although connected entities" (Giddings et al. 2002: 187).

Others have defined Sustainable development as the encouragement of economic growth while protecting the environment and improving our quality of life - all without affecting the ability of future generations to do the same.

## 3.0 The Genesis of Environmental Justice

The birth of environmental justice starts in Genesis when the first people disobeyed God by eating from the forbidden tree. Instead of becoming knowledgeable, the couple discovered that they were naked. The realisation marked the beginning of the quagmire, humanity finds itself today.

The shift in the economic system from socialism to capitalism has had great effects on the lifestyle of the people in the world, changing the manner in which they relate with and use the environment's resources given to us by God.

Individual entrepreneurs, firms and co operations, put all efforts towards wealth creation and profit-making, without considering the sustainability of these resources. The consequent implications of these activities and lifestyles pose a threat to the survival of the future generation (World Bank, 1984:8).

### 3.1 Environmental justice in the light of the Bible

As the advancement of science permits humanity to better understand its impact upon the earth, theologians are increasingly being forced to grapple with important questions of environmental ethics. What does the bible teach about humanity's obligation to care for creation? Is human dominion responsible for the ecological crisis? How does the need of the human person and the integrity of creation properly intersect?

The first sentence of the Bible (In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth Gen 1 v 1) together with the subsequent creation of man, provide a necessary foundation for environmental reflection. God made the earth, and gave to human beings a special place and a role of stewardship in relation to the rest of creation. This place and this role afford human beings a unique dignity and responsibility. This environmental stewardship accurately addresses both human responsibility to the environment and the special place and dignity of human beings within God's creation. So, from the time of creation humanity was given the task to look after the environment. In Genesis1:28-31 it is written

*God blessed them saying, 'be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth' and God also said "Look, to you i give all the seed-bearing plants everywhere on the surface of the earth, and all the trees with seed-bearing fruits..."*

The implication here is that God wanted humanity to have a balanced interrelationship with the environment. To subdue means that the creator put man and woman in charge of the earth to manage and not to destroy. Human beings depend on the earth (environment) for food and other livelihoods, which means that the emphasis is on the interdependence of all things, i.e. people, animals, vegetation, atmosphere and social pressures. In the ecosystem, anything that one element does or anything that happens to one element of the system has consequences for all other elements. Environmental justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.

One can easily notice the imbalance in creation, if humans lack food or plants have no people to manage them. In effect, what we see is God's intention for environmental justice and peace for development because without the action of the plants, animals and micro-organisms that live in them, there could be no pure water in the lakes and rivers. Without

the biological processes that have continued for years, there would be no food, crops, oil or coal. People, nature and the earth form a delicately balanced system. What people do in terms of destruction in one place, has serious consequences on the environment elsewhere. All people are thus affected irrespective of whether they contributed to the problem or not. This becomes an environmental injustice to both people and to the environment. It compromises the peaceful coexistence God intended for His people.

The Garden of Eden which epitomises god's intention of peace and tranquillity for humanity is brought out in Genesis 2:8. In Genesis 2:15, man was given the responsibility to take care of the Garden of Eden and to keep it. This resonates further with another principle of environmental justice which stipulates that a public policy should be based on mutual respect and justice for all people, free from any form of discrimination or bias. Further, Environmental justice demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, radioactive materials and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and the containment at the point of production.

Environmental justice calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production, disposal of toxic and or hazardous wastes and poisons, and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water and food. In this respect, human beings will be carrying out their God given responsibility of taking care of the earth.

In Genesis 2:16, God instructed Adam and Eve to eat selected fruits from the Garden of Eden except those of a particular tree in the middle of the Garden. God had a reason why He did that and when our first parents disobeyed God, the consequences were their nakedness. They then plucked the leaves of the fig tree thus causing stress and injustice to the environment and they also destroyed their own peace and had to hide from God. They had interfered with God's perfect ecosystem (cf. Gen 3:1-13). The mayhem caused by the eating of the forbidden fruit and the destruction of the fig tree were devastating to Adam and Eve; and this is an indication that the environmental problems involve everything on earth and virtually everything can be affected by our actions. It is imperative that people make every effort to evaluate all the implications of human action for the delicately balanced ecosystem if we are to achieve sustainable development.

The chain of consequences for our behaviour for the sake of long term effect on the environment as well as short term effects on our comfort, are dire. The serpent lied to Eve who also convinced her husband Adam to eat the fruit. Thereafter, they had very short-lived pleasure after eating the forbidden fruit but long term consequences of being separated from God. Their departure from Eden caused an imbalance in the ecosystem, no peace as Adam blamed Eve and God by saying, "It was the woman you put with me; she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" and Eve on her part blamed the serpent (Gen 3:12-13). When our first parents were expelled from the Garden of Eden, there was no peace, later, their son Cain, killed his brother Abel out of jealousy (cf. Gen 4:8-15). With our first parents now on their own, the curse that they must till the land caused ecological imbalances such as pollution because now they have to use pesticides and herbicides which are dangerous to soil, air and water since chemical wastes, acid rain and garbage infect the soil. More to this, the curse gave birth to deforestation as the man was seeking to provide food to the wife.

Genesis 1:27 "God created man in the Image of Himself, in the Image of God He created him, male and female He created them". This is fundamental to environmental justice which affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all people. Environmental justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation. All people are equal and hence environmental justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy working environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe works at home to be free from environmental hazards. Environmental justice should consider governmental acts of injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide. Environmental justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality healthcare.

In Micah 1:6, God speaks of making Samaria a heap of rubble, a place of planting vineyards, pouring out stones in the valley and laying bare foundations. Here, God brings down punishment to His people because they are unjust and because there is no peace in the land. We note with great concern that if there is no peace between God and humanity, the earth or environment also suffers unjustly.

*Then I said, "Kindly listen, you leaders of the House of Jacob, you princes of the House of Israel. Surely you are the ones who ought to know what is right, and yet to hate what is good and love what is evil, skinning people alive, pulling the flesh off their bones, eating my people's flesh, stripping off their skin, breaking up their bones, chopping them up small like flesh for the pot, like meat in the stew-pan?" (Mi 3:13).*

In this context, God declares that people must be just if they want their land to be saved from destruction, In Micah 5:8, God speaks of perfect peace where people can live among lions with no fear of danger. What is clear here is that the whole universe is under humanity's care and wears or save it by being friendly to it. That is why environmental justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild cities and rural areas to balance with nature by honouring the cultural integrity of all communities, and providing fair access to resources for all human kind.

Basically, examples from the Bible show that environmental justice is biblical. In Amos 7:1-3, the Bible talks of God punishing His people with a swarm of locusts stripping the land bare because of people's unjust acts. Once more, we are shown here that humanity's activities have an effect on the environment hence, causing an imbalance in the ecosystem with no peace at all. In Amos 9:1-13, the Bible talks of God restoring His people to authority and repairing the broken places once they start practicing justice, which will in turn, bring peace and restoration of the ecosystem.

In Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus speaks of bearing good fruits through which God's people are recognised. The good fruits are love, peace and justice. By implication, Jesus demands equilibrium in our lives when He says, "Can people pick grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles?" (Mtt 7:16). If we are peaceful people, just to each other and to our environment, we shall be known by our actions: Improper disposal of waste, use of harmful chemicals, disposal of raw sewage into our streams, rivers and lakes, pollutes the environment. This in turn shatters development of any kind.

The Gospel of Matthew 13:1-34, Jesus tells His disciples about the parable of the sower, the weeds, the mustard seed and yeast, the hidden treasure and the pearl. In verses 4-9, Jesus tells us that we need to take care of our land or

environment so that whatever we sow flourishes. He gives direction on the type of soil we should plant in order to have a bumper harvest. Jesus too talked of the ecosystem where human beings could live in peace with their environment. Through the parable of the mustard seed, He instructs us to take care of the land that we have because if we conserve our environment in proper ways, it will serve us very well. In effect, Jesus wants us to treasure and preserve the resources His Father gave us by being just. This also means that we should change our attitudes towards the environment. We should not see the earth as a resource to be exploited but as a trust to be cared for. If we take the former, we engage ourselves in the process of self-destruction as we continue to abuse the earth for our own excessive gratification. Instead of saying, "I must get all that I can out of this life", we should say, "I must cherish and sustain the earth that gives us life".

In essence, environmental justice is equal to new relationship to nature and social justice at community level. We believe that everyone should live in a healthy environment. Richer people should not use more than their fair share of the earth's resources. To choose to pursue justice demands mutual respect in fulfilling that choice just like any other. People should not fight and kill each other to lay hands on precious minerals in this world. There is need for people to learn to share equally the riches of the world and together we will achieve sustainable development.

In Habakkuk 1:1-4, the prophet complains to God about injustice in the land which brings conflicts between people and the environment. He says, "Plundering and violence confront me, contention and discord flourish". In verse 4, God in response, promises the prophet that He will punish those who are unjust to others by seizing their dwelling places. In Haggai 1:9, God promises peace to His people stating: "And in this place, I will grant peace, declares the Lord", but we must note that this peace is conditional. In Zephaniah 3:19-20, God declares war on those who oppress others, "At that time, I will deal with those who oppressed you". God promises to gather His people who had been scattered. The gathering is meant to re-unite people for peace, development and prosperity in the land. In Nahum 1:4, the prophet indicates God's anger through the whirlwind, the storm, drying of the sea and rivers and earthquakes because the people are unjust to each other. If the people do not comply with what God requires of them, then God Himself will destroy the ecosystem and destabilise environmental balance which is important for peace and sustainable development.

If human beings interfere with the ecosystem, God's wrath comes down to destroy crops and devastates the land. Nahum 1:4 and Micah 7:1 "How wretched I am, a harvester in summer time, like a gleaner of the vintage: Not a single cluster to eat, none of those early figs I love!" In Exodus Chapters 8 and 9, the Bible shows how Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites by being very unjust to them. God then decided to destroy the ecosystem by sending a number of plagues to the land, for instance, the land was filled with frogs, gnats, flies, hail and locusts; livestock died and water turned into blood. With such calamities, there was no peace in the land and once more, all these happened because of man whom God put in charge of all the earth. Although, all that God had made was good, when allowed to be in unbalanced quantities in time and space, environmental injustice on man and nature arise disturbing peace and development. That is why environmental justice requires that we collectively and individually make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible, and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritise our lifestyles to secure the health of the natural world for the now and the future generations which is all what sustainable development is all about.

Deuteronomy 28:4-5, 9-12, states that if we obey the commands of God, i.e. to maintain the ecosystem, He will bless us abundantly and we shall have peace. God actually implies that people need to be educated about the consequences of environmental pollution and depletion in order to maintain a balanced ecosystem – a balance between people and their natural environment. Human activities disrupt the ecosystem to the point of destruction hence, turmoil and conflict. Hence, environmental justice opposes military destructive operations of multi-national corporations, opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, people and cultures, and other life forms calling for the education of present and future generations, which emphasises social and environmental issues, based on experience and appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives. The implication is that God wanted humanity to have balanced interrelations.

The first step towards a correct relationship with the world around us is the recognition by humans of their status as created beings. Man is not God; he is His image. For this reason he must seek to be more sensitive to the presence of God in his surroundings. In all creatures, and especially in human beings, there is an epiphany, or manifestation, of God.

The human being will be capable of respecting other creatures only if he keeps the full meaning of life in his own heart. Otherwise he will come to despise himself and his surroundings, and to disrespect the environment, the creation, in which he lives. For this reason, the first ecology to be defended is 'human ecology.' This is to say that, without a clear defence of human life from conception until natural death; without a defence of the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman; without an authentic defence of those excluded and marginalized by society ... we will never be able to speak of authentic protection of the environment."

## Recommendations

Despite the destruction that humanity has caused on the environment. There is still hope for sustainable development. There are measures that man should take into consideration for us to have sustainable development.

a) In the first instance humanity should have a sacramental view of the Universe. Here, nature's beauty and diversity should be perceived as revealing something about God. God is present and active in Creation, while also transcendent. "Faced with the glory of the Trinity in Creation, we must contemplate, sing, and rediscover awe," (John Paul II).

The implication here is that, reverence for the Creator present and active in nature may serve as ground for environmental responsibility. It is to the Creator of the universe, that we are accountable for what we do or fail to do to preserve and care for the earth and all its creatures. Humanity should be accustomed to seeing God in everything, because nature is a reflection of God

b) **There is need for a consistent respect for human life, which extends to respect for all Creation.** We should approach the care and protection of the environment from the point of view of the human person. Men and women are created in the image and likeness of God. Fostering and protecting human life and dignity, from conception to natural death, should lie at the heart of our social teachings. We must realise that respect for human life and respect for nature are

inextricably linked. According to John Paul II, "Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of Creation, which is called to join man in praising God." Shamefully, the reverse is also true: Our *lack* of respect for life extends to the rest of Creation and is an underlying cause of social injustice and environmental destruction.

**c) There is need of a world view affirming the ethical significance of global interdependence and the global common good.** Recent ecological concerns have heightened the awareness of how interdependent the world is. According to John Paul II, "Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone.... Its various aspects demonstrate the need for concerted efforts aimed at establishing duties and obligations that belong to individuals, peoples, states, and the international community."

**d) There is need of an ethics of solidarity promoting cooperation and a just structure of sharing in the world community.** We are all part of one human family, whatever our national, racial, religious, economic, or ideological differences. Solidarity is a firm and preserving determination to commit oneself to the common good, and a willingness to lose oneself for the sake of others, including future generations. "The ecological crisis," John Paul II has written, "reveals the urgent moral need for a new solidarity, especially in relations between the developing nations and those that are highly industrialised." Solidarity must take into consideration not only the needs of all peoples but also the protection of the environment in view of the good of all.

"We are all part of God's Creation -- we live as a human family. The whole of Creation is everyone's heritage. All equally created by God, called to share the goods and the beauty of the one world, human beings are called to enter into solidarity of universal dimensions, 'a cosmic fraternity' animated by the very love that flows from God.... We must learn again to live in harmony, not only with God and with one another, but with Creation itself," (Archbishop Renato Martino at a 1992 UN conference in Rio).

All persons are called to a solidarity of universal dimensions that embraces all of Creation, entrusted to the care of all. When solidarity is achieved then sustainable development will also be achieved.

**e) An understanding of the universal purpose of created things, which requires equitable use of the Earth's resources.** God has given the fruit of the earth to sustain the entire human family, including future generations. "The world is given to all, not only to the rich," said Pope Paul VI. The goods of the earth should be shared in a just and charitable manner.

In the words of John Paul II:

It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess good, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence. Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness -- both individual and collective -- are contrary to the order of Creation, an order that is characterised by mutual interdependence.

**f) There is need for a special concern for the poor and vulnerable, which gives passion to the quest for an equitable and sustainable world.** While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern. The ecological problem is intimately connected to justice for the poor. "The goods of the Earth, which in the divine plan should be a common patrimony," "often risk becoming the monopoly of a few who often spoil it and, sometimes, destroy it, thereby creating a loss for all humanity." (John Paul II). The reality is that it is the poor that suffer most directly from environmental decline and have the least access to relief from their suffering."

Our duty is not only to share our wealth, but also to promote the values, institutions, and rights that properly generate wealth, including respect for life, liberty, free market economies, private property rights, the just rule of law, and the right to a safe and healthful environment.

**g) There is need of a conception of authentic development, which offers a direction for progress that respects human dignity and the limits of material growth.** Much of the destruction of environment is caused by arrogance, greed, human ignorance, error and disrespect for life. These lead to rampant consumerism, haphazard development, social injustice, the indiscriminate application of technology, and ultimately, environmental destruction and violence.

John Paul II said, "In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the Earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way.... The mere accumulation of goods and services, even for the benefit of the majority, is not enough for the realisation of human happiness."

## Conclusion

All creation is the Lord's, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God's creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation. We should meet these stewardship duties through acts of love, care and respect. Economic, political, social, and technological developments have increased our human numbers, and lengthened and enriched our lives. However, these developments have led to regional defoliation, dramatic extinction of species, massive human suffering, overpopulation, and misuse and overconsumption of natural and non-renewable resources, particularly by industrialised societies. This continued course of action jeopardises the natural heritage that God has entrusted to all generations. Therefore, let us recognise the responsibility of the Bible to place a high priority on changes in economic, political, social, and technological lifestyles to support a more ecologically equitable and sustainable world leading to a higher quality of life for all of God's creation. Until we are willing to recognise the reparations that are involved in environmental destruction, we will have a very hard time confronting the evil that leads to this degradation of the environment. Every action that harms the ecology of the planet is ultimately a personal decision, and every decision is either in accord with or in violation of the will of God. Every decision human beings make is a moral decision; it is either an act of virtue or a vice.

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