

Neither the Land nor the Earth Belongs to Us: Exploring New Directions in Eco-Theology.

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The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein; for he has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the rivers (Psalm 24:1 RSV).

Introduction

As someone who grew up in two worlds - one being rural Limpopo and the other being Meadowlands township in Soweto - I could draw on my experiences in either of the two - by way of introduction of the theme of this essay.

I could write about the thick blanket of forest into which our village in Limpopo nestled. How I and my friends would disappear for hours inside the forest by day! In there, we picked wild fruits, many of which are no longer available. There we played many games. But at night, we avoided the forest like the plague, because then the forest came alive, we were told. For us, the forest was alive enough by day so that its life at night was simply too ghastly to contemplate.

Of Meadowlands Soweto, I could write about the huge artificial mountains of toxic yellow soil, dug out of the bowels of the earth, in the process of mining for gold. I could recount how we rolled and tumbled down those mushy mountains, even when the yellow stuff was wet and sticky. I could narrate how the the wind blew it all into our nostrils every year in June-July and how we coughed it out through our mouths. I could write about my most abiding memory of Soweto in winter – a township enveloped by a permanent dark cloud of smoke that hung stubbornly above, inside and around the place. The smoke issued out of the “Welcome Dover” coal stove chimneys which stuck out of the matchbox house that lined up the crooked streets of Soweto.

I could write about my stint as president of the South African Council of Churches (2007-2009) – and how we tried and spectacularly failed to integrate anthropocentric political theology with environmental theology. We continued to give too much airtime to the politicians, political parties and conflicts among and between humans.

I could write about my time as leader and manager in various South African universities and how, two decades later, one Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old high school student from

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Sweden, has done more to mobilize society to act against climate change than some researchers and academics.

The focus of my essay however, is more specific, namely to explore how, through a different vision of our relationship with the earth, we could begin a fruitful search for more sustainable eco relations, and a more constructive eco-theology. Mine is a search not merely for an expanded eco-theology but one that also speaks to issues of race, class and gender justice at the same time.

The White Man and his Bible

There is a riddle-like fable often given as an executive summary of the African experience of Christianity in colonialism, and of colonialism in Christianity. Though rendered with various nuances of tone and though used for divergent purposes by various people, the basic structure of the fable remains the same. It goes something like this:

Long long ago, a white man went to Africa. When the white man arrived in Africa, he had the Bible, and the Africans had the land. "Come let us pray", said the white man. And so they prayed together. At the end of the prayer, when they opened their eyes, behold, the white man had the land and the Africans had the Bible.

Over time, the white-man-and-his-Bible anecdote has acquired sacred status in black postcolonial thought, especially in Black and African churches and their theologies. There was a time when Black and African Theology discussions would not begin without the invocation of this anecdote.

In my short life, I have heard no one invoke it more powerfully and more provocatively than Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Defiantly, Tutu concludes that in gaining the Bible in the process of losing the land, the Africans in the anecdote, had gotten the better deal. Together with the likes of Alan Boesak, Lamin Sanneh², Gerald West³ and Bediako⁴, he argues that with the Bible in their hands, the Africans can get back the land, and get much more in the process.

Others – like Itumeleng Mosala and yours truly⁵ - were not so sure.

Deconstructing the Fable

And yet, at this instance, I invoke the anecdote for a slightly different purpose. Rather than simply regurgitate the arguments for whether the Bible can be used to get the land back or not, I wish to deconstruct the anecdote itself.

² Lamin Sanneh, 1988. *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture* Maryknoll: Orbis

³ Gerald West, 2017. *The Stolen Bible. From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon*

⁴ Kwame Bediako, 1995. *Christianity in Africa. The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion.*

⁵ Tinyiko Maluleke, 1995. Half a Century of African Theology. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa.*

While it lacks historical finesse and contextual specifications; while it is rather crass, like all powerful anecdotes; the white-man-and-his-Bible fable, seems to speak to some deeply felt historical experiences of those on ‘the underside of history’ – an expression borrowed from Latin American Liberation Theology, which is hardly ever used these days. That alone makes it worthy of our further consideration.

Most importantly, we wish to deconstruct this particular fable because in some ways, it captures the heart of the theological catch-22 we find ourselves in when it comes to issues of the environment. In the plot of this shortest of anecdotes lies the roots of what the late John Mbiti once termed, our ‘theological impotence’ not only when it comes to issues of the environment but also when it comes to the lack of integration of justice issues that relate to humans and the environment.

Deconstructing the Dramatis Personae

For a moment, let us imagine that the entities who constitute the cast in the white-man-and-his-Bible fable are real life characters in a real life drama.

Enter *the white man*, clad in colourful flowing robes and Jesus-like sandals. Bearded, hairy, a never-seen-before stranger, the white man was nevertheless welcome because he had an authentic look about him. Or maybe it is because in former days, the people of Africa, like the people of Egypt, always welcomed strangers and refugees. Were Moses, Joseph and baby Jesus, not welcomed as refugees in Africa?

Next comes *the Bible* nicely ensconced in the large hands of the white man. The Bible was a large hardcover whose body was as black as the night sky. But its lips were blood-red. It shone and dazzled in the African sun, even as it moved in tandem with the of the white man, as he came marching in.

And there was *the land*; green, lush, adorned with rolling hills, punctuated by full rivers, waterfalls and golden lakes. And a cool breeze blew gently across it.

What about *the Africans*? They were tall and strong like the Maasai of Kenya, sturdy and tough like the Baganda of Uganda, fearless and organized like the AmaZulu of Zululand. And they strode around with pride, like the Vatsonga of South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Not to be outdone by the others, was *the prayer*. It consisted of words that were carefully chosen, sharpened and chiseled like ornamental pebble stones, deftly and delicately put together. The prayer was fervent, passionate, loud and soft where necessary. It was heartfelt.

Initial Analysis of the Fable

But wait. Although it may not seem so at first glance, the anecdote is actually not flattering to either ‘the Africans’ or ‘the white man’. In fact, the careful listener is likely to conclude

that, by the end of the anecdote, none of the five characters in the *dramatis personae* is covered in glory.

The white man – presumably a Christian - comes off as a sly character who should be trusted far less than a mere stone – despite appearances and first impressions. *The Bible* – which at first looked impressive, mysterious and inviting – becomes by the end of the drama, a mere tool of trade and a currency for the exchange of goods and commodities. At the end, *the land*, on whom both the white man and the Africans stood praying, becomes a mere thing, whose essence and beauty lies in it being possessed - first by *the Africans* and then by the traveling white man, in this instance. And the *prayer* prayed in the encounter? Instead of being the means of communion between God and humanity, instead of becoming a language beyond ordinary human languages, prayer becomes the thing with which a temporary suspension of rationality is induced, in order to facilitate a robbery of the worst kind.

Some Historical Analysis of the Fable

It is unlikely that, once upon a time, one solitary white man walked into an African country, armed only with the Bible. That was not the model followed by the the Carthaginians and the Graeco-Roman-Empire in their relationships with North and West Africa.

Nor did solitary white men come walking down a path in some African village, wielding a Bible, during the 400 years of slavery. This did not happen in the colonial era either. When Diago Cão, the Portuguese explorer, the first to try and fail to find a route to India around Africa, launched the African colonial era in 1484, he was no solitary man. He had a formidable entourage. The same goes for Bartolemeu Dias in 1487.

Similarly, when Vasco Gama finally made the breakthrough in his 1497-1499 expedition, he had one hell of an entourage including soldiers, gifts with which to bribe the chiefs, as well as guns to defend himself. After over-staying his welcome in Mozambique, Da Gama and his entourage had to be chased out by the locals. But as they fled, they fired a gun to stun the Mozambicans. They did not throw Bibles at the locals.

Nor did Jan van Riebeeck go marching in like a saint, in April 1652, waving a Bible. He had a full complement of military men and other professionals. Indeed, it took nearly one hundred years before the Dutch would allow mission work among the locals. And yet they had a fully fledged settler church between and among themselves, as John de Gruchy noted in his *Church Struggle in South Africa*.

Clearly therefore, the anecdote about a solitary white man who walks into Africa carrying a Bible, must be mainly symbolic and merely allegorical. It is an especially truncated executive summary of events which, though with a clearly repetitive pattern across the African continent, were nevertheless slightly more complex. Generally, in the encounter between Europeans and Africans, the Bible and the missionary enter the fray much later. Invariably they were preceded by the explorer, the soldier and his gun, the army general and the amateur anthropologist.

The Fate of the Land

Before the colonies were colonies, they were invariably 'virgin lands', occupied by humans without souls, without religion, without culture and without philosophies of life. In his book titled *Savage Systems* David Chidester remarked that the pattern seemed to be that once conquest of land and people were secured, then suddenly they were found to have souls and religions and therefore worthy of civilization and Christianisation. Once conquered both the people and the land could be civilized and Christianised.

If mission stations are anything to go by, then it was not only the conversion of local people to Christianity that was sought by their conversion to a new kind of thinking away from animism. That is the people were required to stop believing that trees, animals lakes and mountains were living things belonging to the same larger family as humans. These practices had to be stopped because some of the looks took them so seriously that they adopted animal names for themselves. That is how we have ended up with Africans whose surnames praise names are, the Ndlovus (elephances), the Ngwenyas (crocodile) and the mthimkhulus (big tree).

Once armed with the new anti-animist belief that forests, lakes, rivers, seas were dead 'things' and that animals were far less than humans, the 'converted' people, together with their evangelisers, were ready to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth," as it says in Genesis 1:28. In the long 'missionary war' against animism and in the destructive relationship of ownership between humans and the environment, few Bible verses have been as misused and abused as Genesis 1:28. For the environment, it has become a 'text of terror' crying out for reinterpretation.

Unless we understand this logic, we will not appreciate the deep schizophrenia in Christianity in Africa and elsewhere pertaining to its anti-animist roots on the one hand, its anthropocentrism, its silence or complicity against injustices against the earth and against some human beings on account of race, gender and religion.

Together Searching of an Ecologically Responsible Theology

When my dog Bruno died in February 2015, my sense of loss was unbearable, I wrote an opinion piece about it⁶. Writing about my loss became an important outlet for my raw emotions at the time. Through it, I was also able to voice my disappointment with and disapproval of former South African president Jacob Zuma's exclusionary anthropocentric politics. In December 2012, Zuma delivered a wide-ranging speech on the need for building a caring society and for 'decolonizing' the African mind. In the speech, amongst other things, Zuma controversially advised the nation, 'not to elevate our love for our animals above our love for other human beings'⁷.

⁶ Tinyiko Maluleke, 'I am African and I mourn for my dog Bruno' (6 March 2015), <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-03-06-i-am-an-african-and-i-grieve-for-my-dog-bruno> (accessed 8 January 2019).

⁷ Quoted in Ibid

Ordinarily, one would assume that the construction of a caring society necessarily includes care for the environment and for creatures other than humankind. However, in the banal and race-laden political battles of South Africa, even animals have been assigned sides. One commonly held stereotype, in that regard, is that black people love humans more than they love animals while white people are supposed to love animals more than they love humans. Therein lay the sting of Jacob Zuma's project for a 'caring society and a decolonized African mind'. It seems that according to Zuma, a caring society is one that excludes animals from the realm of human affection, so that affection can only be expressed between and amongst humans, of the African kind. Though Zuma may have taken the point to the extreme in his 2012 speech, he is not an exception. His view is reflective of the prevailing views among his compatriots and across the globe.

While the Apartheid regime valorised the lives of white people, it seems that the post-Apartheid ANC government has been looking for ways of redress through policies and rhetoric designed to demonstrate the worth of the lives of black people. Both approaches are essentially anthropocentric. They envisage a humans-first-other-life-forms-later hierarchy. Given the 350 years of colonial and Apartheid history, it is at one level understandable that South African politics – like similar nation-state politics – have been and remain human-centred.

Accordingly, the preamble to our constitution seems to place human beings at the centre, while the country as such is framed in terms of its human ownership:

We, the people of South Africa,
Recognise the injustices of our past;
Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;
Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and
Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.⁸

Note how land is referred to with a possessive pronoun, namely, 'our land'. Has it occurred to the writers of the preamble to the constitution the we may belong to the land and not the land to us? Note how in the same sentence, the land, is excluded from those who 'suffered for justice and freedom' and referred to, merely as the container on/in which they experienced suffering. Has it occurred to the writers of the preamble to the constitution the land actually suffered alongside and together with those who suffered for justice and freedom'? Has it occurred to them that the land is one of the cross-bearers who walks alongside the crucified?⁹ It would so profound if the plants, the seas, the rivers and the animals were included in the vision of unity in diversity which is espoused in the preamble to the constitution.

But alas, for many South Africans, the crucial questions for contemporary South African politics pertain primarily to the reparation and enhancement of race relations. Though more famous for its Apartheid policies of racial segregation, South Africa has the distinction of

⁸ Preamble to the South African constitution.

⁹ Takatso Mofokeng, *The Crucified Among the Cross-bearers*.

hosting one of the world's oldest race relations institutions, the South African Institute for Race Relations, now nearly 90 years old. Such has been the importance of race and social engineering in South Africa that the issues of human relations have long preoccupied both politicians and theologians.

And yet, the scars and festering wounds of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid are evident not only on the lives of human beings and their social arrangements, but also on the animals and the environment. Our landscape itself has been variously and indelibly marked by the effects of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid. For instance, the discovery of gold in Johannesburg 130 years ago has affected the terrain, landscape and the entire ecosystem of the area. Evidently, human beings were not the only victims of colonialism and its 'civilizing' agenda,¹⁰ but the rivers, mountains, forests and animals were equally affected.

The Apartheid system separated people through forced removals such as when black people were forcibly removed from Sophiatown.¹¹ Similarly, in order to create homelands for various black ethnic groups and in order to rid whites-only areas of all 'black spots', people had to be moved from one area to another, often with devastating ecological consequences. We often neglect the impact of such contrived human influxes on new environments and on animals – domestic and non-domestic – alike.

More than a hundred and thirty years later, the discovery of gold in Johannesburg and of diamond in Kimberley, combined with the migratory labour system has impacted not only upon human relations but also upon the flora and fauna in the respective areas. Such impacts range from polluted drinking water to periodic earth tremors.

The primary commitment of Dutch and British settlers was to serve the interests of their colonial principals back home. Who would represent the interests of the marine life in the two oceans wrapped around South Africa's coastline? Who would care for the seas? The National Party looked after the interests of the Afrikaners. Who would look after the interests of the lakes and the rivers? The Progressive Federal Party looked after the interests of English speaking settlers, but who would look after the interests of our rainforests? From the time of its establishment 107 years ago, the African National Congress sought to defend the rights of the marginalized and the disenfranchised African majority. But who would defend the elephants, the dogs and the rhinos? Even when the animals and the environment¹² were brought into the equation, it would be on human terms or they would be collateral in the war between and among humans¹³.

¹⁰ See Patrick Harries, *Butterflies and Barbarians: Swiss Missionaries and Systems of Knowledge in South-East Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007).

¹¹ Bloke Modisane, *Blame Me on history* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1987).

¹² Terence Ranger. *Voices from the Rocks. Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe*. (Oxford: James Curry, 1999)

¹³ Jane Carruthers. *The Kruger National Park. A Social Political History*. Pietermaritzburg: (UKZN Press, 1995)

On closer scrutiny, there is evidence to suggest that the humans in question on both sides are heterosexual males. Neither the liberation movements nor the Apartheid regime considered women as full humans alongside men.¹⁴ The intersection between ecological justice and gender justice has been lost to many theologians and politicians. Except in the negative, pejorative and condescending sense in terms of which countries and territories are routinely feminized into ‘virgin territories’ to be ‘conquered’.

Whereas Apartheid society was characterized by racial hierarchies with ecological issues as distant appendages, few metaphors have seized the post-Apartheid era more than those of reconciliation and forgiveness. Inspired by the example of Chilean Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the early 1990s, South Africa established a similar commission chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.¹⁵ The model was premised on the assumption that individual truth-telling and disclosure would lead not only to the healing of individuals but also to national healing as well as national forgiveness. The jury is still out as to whether these lofty goals have been reached.¹⁶ Even so, the South African reconciliation project is only one of a series of anthropocentric interventions – social, political and economic – aimed at ‘building a new nation’.

The notions of ‘rainbow nation’ and ‘transformation’ are significant for the envisaged national ideal. But the ‘rainbow nation’ ideal has seldom, if ever, been envisaged to include the environment and the animal kingdom. And yet the very meteorological phenomenon of a rainbow, from which emanates the metaphor of a ‘rainbow nation’ is a thing nature. It would be profound if the citizenship of the ‘rainbow nation’ was to be granted to the mosquito, the leopard, the lake, the river and the sea.

When reconciliation is viewed from a biblical perspective, it has cosmic implications. After all, has creation not been groaning in anticipation of God’s intervention (see Rom 8.22)? Do the heavens not declare the glory of God? Do the skies not proclaim the work of his hands (Ps. 19.1-2)? And yet, in the two and half decades of South African quarrels, experiments and reflections about reconciliation and transformation; the Earth has been conspicuous by its omission from the debates.

Even significant theological publications from South Africa, such as the otherwise ground-breaking book by David Bosch,¹⁷ seem to have had a blind spot when it comes to ecological perspectives. In this book, as in several others of comparable stature, there is little

¹⁴ Tinyiko Maluleke, ‘Of Wounded Killers and “Failed Men”’: Broadening the Search for Liberating African Masculinities’, *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 24:1 (2018), 33-78. See also Mmatshilo Motsei, *The Kanga and the Kangaroo Court: Reflections on the Jacob Zuma Rape Trial* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2007).

¹⁵ See Tinyiko Maluleke, ‘Truth, National Unity and Reconciliation in South Africa’ *Missionalia* 25:1 (1997), 59-86.

¹⁶ See, Tinyiko Maluleke, ‘Perhaps we are too ready to forgive’. <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-02-05-perhaps-we-are-too-ready-to-forgive> (accessed 11 January 2019).

¹⁷ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

awareness of the global ecological disaster that often went hand in hand with the discharging of the ‘white man’s burden’ as it related to mission and evangelization,¹⁸ which sometimes included large-scale reforestation projects and the re-orientation of human relations with and perceptions of nature. African theologies of liberation have equally not managed to emerge from their anthropocentric cocoons.

A few theologians such as Ernst Conradie have focussed on Christian ecotheology for a sustained period. Laurenti Magesa¹⁹ has convincingly argued that in African religion, almost everything – animate and inanimate – is sacred. Itumeleng Mosala sought to extend the notion of reconciliation so that it includes more than humans when he wrote: Reconciliation must have something to do with the reversal of our alienation; and our alienation is not from white people first and foremost; our alienation is from our land, our cattle, our labour which is objectified in industrial machine ...²⁰ Similarly, Marthinus Daneel has tracked the earthkeeping traditions and practices of some Zimbabwean Independent Churches.²¹

Several problems are discernable even in the works of those who have consciously delved into ecological issues. The approaches tend either to be parallel to political theologies and theologies of liberation or they attempt to replace them. Theologians need to find the connections between Christian mission theologies and ecology, and between political theologies and ecology.

Searching for an Integrated Theology

Without airbrushing the fissures between and within various South African theological orientations, I would like to argue that most of them tend to neglect and even negate the plight of the Earth as a legitimate theological quest. In this context, theological contempt for climate change manifests through silence and exclusion rather than the overt theological and political polemics of the kind that Donald Trump is spearheading in the USA.

Contextual and liberationist South African theology declared a *kairos* moment to deal with Apartheid policies through the declaration of Apartheid as a heresy and the publication of the Kairos Document in 1986. The latter had great impact within South Africa and beyond.

By way of contrast the 2009 South African Council of Churches booklet, which was the closest to a climate-change *kairos* statement, did not have nearly the same impact. Nor did it mobilise the same levels of participation from the theological community. This is in part, because theologians and politicians have yet to crack the code that links South Africa’s most ‘wicked problems’ to the ecological crisis.

¹⁸ See Patrick Harries, *Barbarians and Butterflies*.

¹⁹ Laurenti Magesa, *What is Not Sacred?: African Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013).

²⁰ Itumeleng Mosala, ‘The Meaning of Reconciliation: A Black Perspective’, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 59 (1987), 19-25.

²¹ Marthinus Daneel *African Earthkeepers* Volume 1 and 2 (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001).

South Africa's 'wicked problems' are well known. They include: inequality, unemployment, poverty, a comatose economy and a dire lack of social cohesion. What we seem to have failed to do is to make the connections between these challenges and the current looming ecological disaster. Indeed it seems foolhardy to think these can be tackled without dealing with the ecological crisis.

In our context, the reticence towards environmental degradation is not so much scepticism about the science of climate change, it is rather the lack of discernment which prevents African theological communities from connecting the dots between the challenges faced by the Earth and the well-known wicked problems of our time.

Willis Jenkins, an environmentalist theologian in the USA has noted that what makes climate change especially vexatious is that what he calls the "quotidian complicity". By this he means that all of us contribute to the aggravation of climate change through routine, yet indispensable acts such as cooking and travelling. Closely linked to this point is the burden of history and how we are all entangled in the effects of the atmospheric and ecological actions of previous generations. The pervasive nature of climate change means it cannot be tackled at nation state or even regional block levels.

Churches not only need to see the connections between ecology and their current theological agendas, they also need to work to the rhythm of a different time scale than the five, ten or fifteen year plans of conventional politics. The harming of ecological biodiversity takes longer than the term of a president. Sometimes the full ecological impact is felt only a century later.

A very important turn we need to make in Africa is to reengage with practices which we used to condemn and dismiss as animism and fetishism. And yet the ecological myopia or ecological blindness of our times must be located not only in epistemology and cognition, but also in the temptation merely to revise the dominant but culpable Euro-American intellectual and theological traditions.

In fact, one of the first things we must abandon is the idea that all we need to do is to access 'premodern sources' and 'Indigenous cosmovisions'. Until we valorise the humanity of the bearers of these 'cosmovisions' as well as their past and present experiences, it will neither be sufficient nor possible to artificially access Indigenous knowledge and worldviews. Even if it were possible to access these 'cosmovisions, to do so without dealing with the reality of the knowledge-bearers' inherited and contemporary suffering at the hands of political, academic and commercial merchants of (white) human superiority, would be farcical.

The South African Department of Science and Technology has established and advocated a knowledge domain called the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). But can the IKS of despised Indigenous communities, that remain marginalized, be sustainably appreciated? If our 'cosmological repair' project is to stand a chance of succeeding, it must begin with a reparation project for the humanity of those whose intrinsic worth was questioned²²

²² Casper Erichsen and David Olusoga. *The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2011)

alongside that of the fauna and flora – the people whom ‘science’ relegated to the realm of ‘things’²³ together with forests, animals and rivers.

Latin American liberation theology was on the right path when it identified the ‘non-human’ as its primary interlocutor, in place of white middle class males. Unfortunately, even liberation theology seems to have failed to include the environment and the Earth among the oppressed and the ‘non-human. The acts that enslaved and colonized people, are the same acts that have brought the Earth to the point of ecological implosion. The same push for development, narrowly defined is what brought us to where we are today

The challenge we face is therefore primarily one of integration. We need to stop excluding the Earth from our discussions of forgiveness, reconciliation and transformation and from the ranks of the oppressed, marginalized and vulnerable.

En Route with Jonah

The book of Jonah has one of the strangest endings of any book in the Bible. It ends in anger and bitterness. Jonah sulks and walks away from God in anger. But that is not all. In the drama of Jonah and his tussle with God, animals and nature are assigned salvific roles. When Jonah tries to run away from God, the sea collaborates with the fish, to send Jonah back to the route of his calling. And again, when suicidal Jonah storms out in anger after God shows mercy to the city of Nineveh, God follows Jonah and causes a plant to grow overnight for his shelter from the sun. But when he remains angry and ungrateful God takes the plant away – which makes suicidal Jonah even more furious. In the final verse of the book, God asks Jonah a telling rhetorical question:

And should not I pity Nin’evah, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

Suddenly, the animals of Nineveh are thrown into the mix. While some versions specify and speak of cattle, other simply refer to animals in general. Part of the reason had mercy on Niniveh was not only the presense of humans who had repented but also the presence of many animals in that city. Is it possible that the animals repented too?

Bruno, Jesus and Me

I began this essay by referencing my opinion piece about the death of my dog Bruno. Towards the end of the opinion piece, I refer to the famous verse, ‘for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son ...’ (John 3.16). It seems to me that there is nothing exclusively anthropocentric about God’s love. If God loves the world, then Jesus Christ did not die for human beings alone or a section thereof. He died for the entire world, which God so loves. In light of this, I suggested that when Jesus comes again, my dog Bruno and I will dance with him.

²³ Christa Kuljian. *Darwin’s Hunch. Science, Race and the Search for Human Origins.* (Johannesburg: Jacana 2016).

My inspiration for this seemingly outrageous claim was a popular Xitsonga language call-and-response chorus we sing in South African churches. The chorus paints a picture of people dancing with Jesus on occasion of his arrival at the second coming:

Call: *Siku rin'wana Hosi Yesu u ta vuya.* (One day, the Lord Jesus will come again.)

Response: *Siku rin'wana Hosi Yesu u ta vuya.*

Call: *Hina hi ta cina-cina, hi ta cina-cina na Yesu.* (And we shall dance, and dance with Jesus.)

Response: *Hina hi ta cina-cina, hi ta cina-cina na Yesu.*

Assuming that the Second Coming has environmental and ecological consequences, I couldn't bear the thought of excluding my beloved dog, in the anticipated dance with Jesus. And yet I fear that the spectre of chaos and confusion that came to Europe in the aftermath of WW1 which was so eloquently captured by William Butler Yeats in his poem titled 'The Second Coming'²⁵ may come to pass yet again, this time with cosmic consequences.

Ironically, it is a poem whose following lines, 'things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world' inspired Africa's second English novel, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*²⁶ – a novel that speaks to the chaos visited upon Africa in the wake of colonialism. If slavery, colonialism and the two world wars occasioned 'things fall apart' moments for human beings, indications are that the ecological disaster which human beings are driving is threatening the Earth with utter extinction. There may be no dancing when Jesus returns, after all. Instead, his Second Coming of Jesus, may signal the end.

To Conclude: We Belong to the Land

There is another flaw in the way the white-man-and-his-Bible anecdote is told. That flaw shows up in both the two opposing formulations which constitute the central conflict in the story, the first being, 'the white man had the Bible and the Africans had the land' and the second is: 'the white man had the land and the Africans had the Bible'.

Both of these two opposing sentences are deeply flawed. The vision of ownership and possession – of both the the Bible and especially the land - which they espouse, is problematic. The idea of a complete and total possession of the Bible is one that fails to see the Bible as hermeneutical text, that is a always text needing our interpretation. Such a possessive approach to the Bible seems bent on controlling and taming the Bible.

There is therefore a sense in which we can never 'have the Bible' in any categorical and complete manner. Sometimes, the Bible has us. Sometimes the Bible reads us. Sometimes the Bible bites back.

Even more problematic is the notion of humans possessing the land. While it may not point to a contemporary reality, the linguistic formulation of several Bantu languages, seems to

²⁵ The poem 'The Second Coming' was included in William Butler Yeats, Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921), now available on Kindle Books.

²⁶ Chinua Achebe, 1958. Things Fall Apart. London: Heinemann

invoke an era when and where there was a different vision of ownership and possession. Care must of course be taken not to essentialise or ossify linguistic formulations and the poetic styles of different languages. But in general, the infinitive verbs “to have” and “to be” are rendered differently in several Bantu languages. Instead of saying ‘I have land’ the formulation is “I am with land”. Instead of saying “I have a house”, the formulation is “I am with a house”. This is significant because it speaks of a vision of ownership and possession where the possessor never possesses totally, so that possessed and the would-be possessor retain their separate identities. In this initial sense, the land cannot be possessed or owned. But there are other and deeper ways in which we have to change the vision of our relationship with the land and by extension, with the earth. In this sense, a better formulation of the anecdote which would represent the African position better would go like this:

Long long ago, a white man went to Africa. When the white man arrived in Africa, he *had the Bible*, and the Africans *were with the land*. “Come let us pray”, said the white man. And so they prayed together. At the end of the prayer, when they opened their eyes, behold, the white man *had the land* and the Africans *were with the Bible*.

And yet, even this is not the best we can do. What we need in the 21st century is to move towards a place, where the anecdote may read something like:

Long long ago, a white man went to Africa. When the white man arrived in Africa, he *was with the Bible*, and the Africans *were with the land*. “Come let us pray”, said the white man. And so they prayed together. At the end of the prayer, when they opened their eyes, behold, the white man and the Africans *were with the land* to which they together with the forests, the lakes, the rivers and fellow animals. And *the Bible* was with them to help them to walk *with God*.