

The Perishable and the Imperishable in 1st Peter 1:18-25, Eco-justice? An African Interpretation

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Abstract

This paper presents a theological approach to the discourse on eco-justice using a hermeneutical interpretation of the Epistle of 1st Peter 1:18-25. This paper defines the relationship of humans and other inhabitants under the principle of intrinsic values using the terms perishable and imperishable from the epistle. This is needful as the current interaction of humans with other creatures is one of injustice resulting from the dominance of humans over the other inhabitants. The cause of the dominance as shown in this paper is theological. Theological in the sense that all humans regardless of the race or era see themselves as created to be superior over other creatures. This has presented several adverse effects on both humans, other inhabitants of the earth and the earth at large. The hermeneutical interpretation is also juxtaposed with African traditional beliefs on proper engagement of humans in dialogue with the Earth and non human members of the community. Thereafter, objective recommendation and conclusion are made.

Key Words: Perishables, Imperishable, Eco-justice, African Interpretation.

Introduction

The current social system of the earth is one in which the socio-biological difference exhibits the superiority of one part of creation over another (Habel, 2000). Sheila Collins (1996) adequately puts it as a system of domination. Since ancient times, most societies with a few exceptions have operated in systems of domination; human over humans, nation over nations, men over men and presently, humans over others parts of the ecosystem. From careful examination, the effect has been negative, some of which are: inequality within the system; control, abuse, underdevelopment, subjugation and sometimes destruction of the dominated. Those in the lower rank are filled with subjectivity and attempts to renounce the subordinate roles are often met with opposition from those in the higher rank. In the ecosystem, according to the biblical account, the humans were created by God to “rule over” and subjugate plants, animals, insects and every living thing on the earth. See Genesis 1 and 2. The question therefore is, is this a fair treatment of the creatures of God by humans? Does the meaning of “rule over” include tyrannical subjection of other creatures by humans? Or does it mean to care for the others? This paper presents the epistle of 1st Peter as a foundation for the discussion on the ecological system of the earth. It consequently looks at how the inter-relatedness and interdependence of nature as articulated in 1st Peter.

Generally speaking the book of 1st Peter as a whole is filled with references to non-human members of the earth community. For instance, chapter one, mentions silver, gold, lamb, grass and flowers; in chapter two, references are made to milk, stone, gold and sheep. Chapter three have references to water and ark while chapter four, makes references to flock and lions. In this study, the scope of study is limited to 1 Peter 1:18-25. References may sometimes be made to other chapters when necessary.

Definition of concepts

Perishables and imperishable

The word perishable with the Greek spelling *Φθαρτος* (p^hartos) used in 1st Peter 1:18-25 expresses mortality, corruptibility and perishability while the imperishable from the Greek *Φθαρτον* (p^harton) signify the uncorrupted, not liable to decay, undying and enduring (Thayer, 2000). Efforts are made to know who and what the perishable and imperishable refer to in the discourse. How do they apply to humans and other members of the earth in the eco-justice discourse? Are humans more important than others? If they are, do they belong to the class of the imperishable and how does that affect their obligation to other creatures? For better understanding, the Epistle of 1st Peter is necessary.

Interpretation of 1st Peter 1:1-25

Below is the Greek and English version of the passage to be interpreted

ειδότες ὅτι οὐ φθαρτοῖς, ἀργυρίῳ ἢ χρυσίῳ ἐλυτρώθητε ἐκ τῆς ματαίας ὑμῶν ἀναστροφῆς πατροπαραδότου, ἀλλὰ τιμίῳ αἵματι ὡς ἀμνοῦ ἀμόμου καὶ ἀσπίλου Χριστοῦ, προεγνωσμένου μὲν πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου, φανερωθέντος δὲ ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν χρόνων δι' ὑμᾶς τοὺς δι' αὐτοῦ πιστοὺς εἰς θεὸν τὸν ἐγείραντα αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν καὶ δόξαν αὐτῷ δόντα, ὥστε τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν καὶ ἐλπίδα εἶναι εἰς θεόν. Τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν ἠγνικότεες ἐν τῇ ὑπακοῇ τῆς ἀληθείας εἰς φιλαδελφίαν ἀνυπόκριτον, ἐκ [καθαρᾶς] καρδίας ἀλλήλους ἀγαπήσατε ἐκτενῶς, ἀναγεγεννημένοι οὐκ ἐκ σπορᾶς φθαρτῆς ἀλλὰ ἀφθάρτου, διὰ λόγου ζῶντος θεοῦ καὶ μένοντος: διότι πᾶσα σὰρξ ὡς χόρτος, καὶ πᾶσα δόξα αὐτῆς

ὡς ἄνθος χόρτου: ἐξηράνθη ὁ χόρτος, καὶ τὸ ἄνθος ἐξέπεσεν: τὸ δὲ ῥῆμα κυρίου μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. τοῦτο δὲ ἐστὶν τὸ ῥῆμα τὸ εὐαγγελισθὲν εἰς ὑμᾶς.

18: You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers not with perishable things such as silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. 20 He was destined before the foundation of the world but was manifest at the end of the times for your sake. 21 through him you have confidence in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. 22 Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart. 23 You have been born a new, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; 24 for “all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, 25 but the word of the Lord abides forever.” That word is the good news which was preached to you (Zodhiates, KJV, 1991).

A background to the passage shows the demand for Christians (human) to relate with one another in love and practice holiness with the fear of God. The demand for this is reflected in some factors that qualified them as imperishable in the passage above.

Criteria for being Imperishable

First criteria for being imperishable in the passage is the price for the redemption only paid for by Jesus Christ through his sacrificial death on the cross. This is like the paschal lamb sacrificed on the behalf of the Israelites during the Passover (Burkitt, 2000). The redemptive work of Jesus hence puts Christians in the light of the imperishable because it is precious and believed can *purify* souls. The word purify in Greek is *hagnizo* and it occurs seven times in the New Testament. John 11:55; Acts 21:24; 24:18. Barnes, (2000) writes that it refers to both ceremonial and moral purification that is, the cleansing of life from sin. The latter meaning is what is significant to this study; it refers not only to forgiveness of sin but to a pure life worthy of emulation. He further gives background information on those who the author of the epistle was writing to were people who served other gods than the God in the bible. They were expected to live holy life derived from the belief in the redemptive blood of Jesus Christ. This was an effectual way to induce true identity and acceptance with God.

Second criterion is the worth of the redemption over the worth of silver and gold. Silver and Gold were the most valuable materials on earth formally used to pay for the redemption of captives. The redeemed captive sees it as an obligation to love the benefactor in the proportion to the price which was paid for his ransom. When elucidated in the light of the believers, redemptive work of Christ is higher as gold and silver are referred to as corruptible materials in passage. Christians like redeemed captives are under proportionate obligation to devote themselves to God's and love service since they have been redeemed by the life of his son, Jesus Christ.

Third criterion is the Christian is born again through the word of God along the redemptive word of Christ. This is compared with the natural birth of being giving but by biological parents. However, the birth of the biological parents is regarded as the corruptible seeds with the tendency to decay because it involves “human being giving birth to only to die.” (Barnes, 2000) The new life is planted by the incorruptible seed which is the word of God and can only be obtained through faith and not reasoning. The word of God gives it life; it is the divine truth that is an instrument for quickening the soul into spiritual life. The expression “which lives and abides forever” may either refer to God as living forever

or to the word of God as being forever true. Despite scholars diverse position on this, Barnes (2000) feels that the more natural Greek translation is to refer the word to God as ever living and enduring as well as that which comes from him to the human soul which endures forever. As the author states, the word of God is eternal and never loses its power.

Origin of the Perishable and Journey to the Imperishable

Origin of the Perishable

An exegesis of 1st Peter calls for tracing the beginning of the term perishable since the factors for imperishable have been identified. From the findings, humans became perishable when Adam and Eve (Parents of the human race) disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit in Genesis 1. It was therefore necessary to buy them back to the imperishable state by an unblemished sacrifice which was human sacrifice.

Journey to the Imperishable

The journey to the imperishable entails sacrifice of atonement. According to Barnes, (2000), the atonement was not an afterthought but predestined from eternity, before the foundation of the world or the creation of angels, man, earth or material universe. This is because there was certainty that human race was going to fall and would become corrupted to the state of apostasy.

Jesus Christ was the only one who measure to the standard of the lamb that was sacrifice which had no blemish in the Old Testament. (Leviticus 22:20-24, Malachi 1:8). A lamb among the Jews was killed and eaten at the Passover to commemorate their deliverance from Egypt (Exodus 12:3). A lamb was also offered in the tabernacle and afterwards in the temple every morning and evening as part of the daily worship (Exodus 29:38 &39). It was an emblem of patience, meekness and gentleness which also characterized and qualifies Christ as a lamb. He was made a sacrifice or atonement for sin at the usual time of the evening sacrifice. (Luke 23:44-46).

The journey back to the imperishable state also involves being taught to know God through Christ Jesus the redeemer and believing in him who raised Christ from the dead.

Giving 1st Peter 1:18-25 An Ecological Interpretation from an African Perspective

The Inter-relatedness of the eco-community

Faniran (2002) an African scholar listed some of the elements of the physical environment mentioned found in the Bible which also covers the passage under focus under four major categories or theme.

- Lithopheric elements-the world of rocks, mineral, land forms and so on
- Atmospheric elements: the world of gases
- Hydropheric elements: the world of water
- Biospheric elements: the world of plants, including trees, animals or living things.

In the passage under review, there are lithospheric elements and biospheric elements. He opines that generally, each component contributes to the earth ecological system and impairment to any component affects the rest. This shows the interdependence, interconnectedness and interrelatedness of the created order. Abogunrin (2009) affirms that the biblical view of man's relationship with nature is that of responsibility and authority. The authority to subdue and rule over all else does not give man the right to anything cruel on the creation because it remains God's creation and man remains answerable to him. This is buttress with a Yoruba part of western Nigerian

Yi ese' re si apakan;

Mase te' kokoro ni;
Kokoro ti iwo ko naani ni;
Oloorun ni o lee daa;
Olorun ri o fun ni emi re
Ni o fi apakan ife re 'nla;
Si ara kokoro ni;
O da orun ati osupa;
Fun gbogbo eda re
Osi te eweko nile
Fun kokoro ati iwo
Je ki won o jaye ori won
Ki won gba ibukub won
Haa!mase fi ainaani
Gba emi to o keleeda.

Turn, turn aside your foot;
Do not step on that insect
The insect for which you have no regard,
It is only God who can create it.
The same God who gave you life;
Is the One who in His good pleasure
Has showed His love upon the insect.
He created the sun and moon;
For all His creatures,
Allow them to enjoy the abundance of the Earth;
Let them enjoy their blessings
No! do not of your own disregard;
Destroy a life you cannot create

This poem is very important to the Yoruba people as it teaches them not to harm insects and other members of the earth community. Generally, the relationship of human to non-human members of the earth community is anthropocentric. Humans use them as a means to an end

Africans belief non-humans of the earth community have peculiarities common to living things- they have feelings and their lives are also sacred. There is also a story from the Yoruba speaking part of Nigeria of a man who was very erratic and aggressive. In one of his feats of anger, he killed a goat which later caused him some misfortunes. As typical of African people, he sought out for the solution through consultation of oracle (gods). It was revealed to him that the source of his problems was the killing of the goat which he needs to appease.

The interconnectedness of members of the earth community in the bible text is exhibited as Jesus as the lamb is celebrated. The ultimate sacrifice for the sins of man is compared to the lamb. That which is looked down as with no value but to be killed by humans is chosen by the author to be celebrated as the imperishable. The identification of Jesus with the lamb implies liberation for animals and other members of the earth community. This means that all creatures are equal and none should oppress the other

Interconnectedness is also seen in the light of humans being compared to grass in verse 24. It indicates all members of the earth community do not exist forever. Death is a leveler and no creature has any right to be callous to the other. The question that should be posed to humans is “should they still oppress other creatures since they all share in the nature of dying?”

As part of inter-connectedness of the eco-system, the Yoruba people according to Dada (2011) have a prayer offered in this manner:

Ori rere ni ti Agbado
Ihoho ni agbado maa nlo si oko
Oni ruu ru igba Aso ni
Agbado maa n mu wa si ile
Beenu Olorun yoo se oro wa

The farmer plants the maize naked
And singularly in the bush,
The maize returns home in
Folds/multiples so shall the
Almighty God crown all our efforts (Amen)

This prayer recognizes God’s blessings on the maize and it is desired. As God is good to the maize, man is not to do otherwise. In the African dream mythology, when someone dreams of being in the midst of maize, it is believed to a sign of good things to some. This can thus mean God uses other members of the earth community to communicate to man. God considers plants to be important too.

To show the interrelatedness of nature in Nigeria, when yam is planted, it decays in the land and thereafter germinated. The traditional people have seen it as an example of resurrection. That is why, they will not eat new yam until the new yam festival has been celebrated. God is seen as the master of all while nature is seen as interrelated.

Nature in the broadest sense of the word is not an empty impersonal object of phenomenon: it is filled with religious significance (Bryant 1995). We are encouraged to recognize the wisdom of the “Cosmo-centric” African traditions. Mor Mbiti as cited by Bryant (1995) rightly says “traditional African societies have been neither deaf nor blind to the spiritual dimension of existence, which is so deep, so rich and so beautiful. African traditions understand that nature was more than just matter to be exploited. He also quotes a Zulu prophet to have said, the voice of the great spirit of all Zulus had spoken to him, in the sound of the wind, in the grass when he went out to herd the cattle, in the songs of the birds at dawn, in the water rushing over the rocks, in the rain and in the thunder.

The divine and the world of non-human are interconnected and are filled with wonder. Humans dependence on them are inevitable. The traditional prayers in Zimbabwe and Ashanti as found in Bryant (1995) below reflect this:

Great Spirit

Piler up of the rocks into towery mountains...
You sew the heavens like cloth:
Knit together that which is below:
Caller forth of the branching trees;
You bring forth the shoots
That they stand erect.
You have filled the land with mankind...

Above the earth and create the rivers,
Gracious One.

Earth and dust
The dependable one
I lean upon you,
Earth, when I am about to die
Earth, when I am alive,
I depend upon you,
Earth, while I am alive
I depend upon you

Significance of the Imperishable to Eco-justice

The essence of being made imperishable as the writer of 1st Peter 1:18-25 puts it is to encourage adherents to have genuine love for one another. This is attainable because Christian souls have been purified from pride and self-centeredness. Love is the central value found in the passage to be practice by the imperishable to other members of the community.

The identification of Jesus with the lamb implies liberation for the other members of the earth community. This means that all creatures are equal and none should oppress the other. Instead of being master over nature, humans should learn to be partners with nature in a bio-human cosmic community. This wisdom should be applied in order to address the environment crisis that is everywhere around us.

From the examination of 1st Peter 1:18-25, the imperishable informs us of the nature of the creator of all things and who himself and his words are imperishable. The imperishability of God is well acknowledged in both the Christian and African precisely Yoruba theology. The imperishable reveals the immortality of God which stands out in the Yoruba belief and it is compared with the non-human members. For example, God is referred to as “Oyigiyigi, Ota Aiku” which means the mighty, immovable rock that never dies. Some Odu recitals that speak about the immortality of God in Idowu (1996) are listed below:

(a) Ogbe Yeku
Korofo, awon Aja- ile
Lo difa fun Olodumare
Ti o so wipe won o ni gbo
Iku re lae lae (*sic*)

Korofo, the cult of underground
Is the one which consulted the oracle about the Almighty
And declared that his death will never be heard

(b) Ogbe Yeku
Olodumare sa ye, e e ku mo
Gbogbo ori n fun puru-puru-puru

Almighty has rubbed his head
With bar-wood dust (*iye irosun*)
He never dies

(His) whole head is become exceedingly hoary

However, there is a limit of the immortality of God's nature in man due to man's wickedness. A Yoruba poet Duro Adeleke (1997) expresses thanks to God for creating death due to the wickedness and hard-heartedness of man thus.

Kabiyesi re Edumare
Oba nla to joba aye lo...iwo loba to da abemi
O tun da ohun ti kii mi
O dad a olorun oba
O da iku
Ope Olodumare
Pe o da 'ku
Iku tii ro gbogbo alagbara leegun

We worship you Almighty
The king that is higher than earthly kings...
You are the king that created the living
You also created the non-living
You created death
Thank you Almighty
That you created death
Death that softens the bones of the mighty

The implication of this is that humans cannot live long as expected non-human members of the community are treated unfairly and unjustly. This shows all members of the earth community are linked together and are perishables. Therefore with this understanding, no one should oppress the other.

Recommendation

The following recommendations are made based on the study done in this paper.

- All rights of other members of the earth such as animal rights community should be entrenched in the nation's constitutions. This is because oppression is interconnected; no one creature will be free until all are free.
- Eco justice education should be encouraged in homes, schools, religious organizations and the society at large. The well-being of all members of the earth community should be encouraged and its abuse discouraged especially by the religious organizations such as churches because the earth is sacred.
- In order to avoid ecological disaster, humanity has to recover its connectedness to the planet earth.
- For proper capacity to hear the members of the earth community speak in its distinctive ways, we must learn how to listen a new to the natural world like Bryant, (1995) says, "so that the spirit can speak to us though its own intrinsic voice"
- We should also learn to regard the earth as "the mediator of the sacred" proficiently declaring the glory of God; therefore the earth community members should not be exploited.
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Conclusion

It has been stated in this paper from the epistle of 1st Peter 1: 18-25, that only the divine is imperishable. By implication, all members of the earth community including man are perishable. Juxtaposing it with

the African belief, this work has confirmed, all creatures whether humans, plants and animals are interdependent. It is only fair to call all humans to the state of penitence, to a change of mind and attitude, to abandon purely utilitarian attitudes and adopt an eco-friendly attitude towards all other members of the earth. Animals and plants who are members of the earth community as shown in this paper also have worth and dignity. It has been demonstrated also how all members live in the web of relationship that cannot be denied, hence, the need for justice and fair treatment for all.

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