



BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: REREADING ISAIAH 51:6 IN THE AGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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Abstract

The global ecological crisis, particularly climate change, has intensified scholarly engagement between theology and environmental studies. This paper explores the intersection of biblical eschatology and ecological degradation through a contextual rereading of Isaiah 51:6, which states that “the earth will grow old like a garment.” Traditionally interpreted within apocalyptic and eschatological frameworks, this prophetic imagery is here re-examined in light of contemporary environmental realities, especially within the African context. Employing interdisciplinary methods - biblical exegesis, ecological hermeneutics, and theological analysis - the study argues that Isaiah’s metaphor provides both a diagnostic and ethical framework for understanding the climate crisis. African theological perspectives, which emphasize relationality, community, and sacred cosmology, are integrated to demonstrate how indigenous and Christian worldviews can contribute to ecological sustainability. Through case studies from Nigeria and other parts of Africa, the paper critiques fatalistic interpretations of eschatology and proposes a constructive ecological eschatology grounded in stewardship, justice, and hope. The study concludes that Isaiah 51:6 should not be read as a justification for ecological neglect but as a call to responsible participation in God’s redemptive plan for creation.

Keywords: Eschatology, Climate Change, Isaiah 51:6, African Theology, Ecological Hermeneutics, Creation Care

Introduction

The contemporary global order is increasingly characterized by ecological instability and environmental decline. Climate change, once perceived as a distant or abstract scientific concern, has now become an immediate and lived reality across the globe. According to Kii and Okai (2025), addressing the challenges of climate change should take a holistic strategy (P. 39). Hence, the concern to study and address the rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, extreme weather events, sea-level rise, and biodiversity loss. So from the Biblical perspective these manifestations indicate that the Earth’s ecological systems are under severe stress. From the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, there is unequivocal evidence that human activities—particularly greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel combustion, deforestation, and industrial processes - are the dominant drivers of recent climate change (IPCC, 2023). This positions the ecological crisis not merely as a natural phenomenon but as a consequence of human behavior, raising profound ethical and theological questions about humanity’s role within creation.



The impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed, with developing regions bearing the greatest burden. Africa, in particular, is widely recognized as one of the most vulnerable continents despite contributing minimally to global emissions (Niang et al., 2014). The continent's high dependence on rain-fed agriculture, limited adaptive capacity, and socio-economic challenges exacerbate its susceptibility to environmental shocks. In the Sahel region, recurrent droughts have intensified desertification and food insecurity. East Africa has experienced alternating cycles of drought and flooding, disrupting pastoral and agricultural livelihoods. Similarly, coastal regions across West Africa face the dual threats of sea-level rise and coastal erosion, which endanger both ecosystems and human settlements (Serdeczny et al., 2017).

Nigeria exemplifies the complexity of climate-related challenges in Africa. In the northern regions, desert encroachment and declining rainfall have led to reduced agricultural productivity and increased competition over scarce resources, often resulting in communal conflicts. The shrinking of Lake Chad, once a vital water source for millions, illustrates the devastating effects of climate variability and human mismanagement (Onuoha, 2014). In contrast, southern Nigeria, particularly the Niger Delta, faces environmental degradation due to oil exploration, gas flaring, and recurrent oil spills. These activities have severely polluted land and water, undermining livelihoods and public health (UNEP, 2011). Additionally, urban centers such as Lagos experience frequent flooding due to poor drainage systems, rising sea levels, and unplanned urbanization (Adelekan, 2016). These realities highlight the multidimensional nature of the ecological crisis, encompassing environmental, economic, social, and political dimensions.

In addressing these challenges, religion emerges as a significant factor influencing human attitudes and responses to the environment. In Africa, religious beliefs are deeply embedded in cultural and social life, shaping moral values, worldviews, and patterns of behavior. Christianity, in particular, plays a dominant role, and its sacred text, the Bible, serves as a primary source of ethical guidance for millions of believers. However, interpretations of biblical teachings have varied widely, leading to differing approaches to environmental issues.

Historically, certain interpretations of biblical texts have been criticized for promoting anthropocentrism and environmental exploitation. For instance, the mandate of human dominion over the earth in Genesis 1:28 has often been understood as a license for unchecked use of natural resources (White, 1967). This interpretation contributed to what some scholars describe as a theological justification for ecological degradation. In response, contemporary theological scholarship has sought to recover alternative readings that emphasize stewardship, care, and the intrinsic value of creation (Bauckham, 2010). This shift has given rise to the field of ecological theology, which explores the relationship between religious beliefs and environmental responsibility.

Within this discourse, biblical eschatology occupies a critical yet contested position. Eschatology, concerned with the ultimate destiny of the world, has often been interpreted in ways that influence environmental attitudes. Some apocalyptic interpretations emphasize the eventual destruction of the earth, potentially fostering a sense of inevitability and discouraging ecological action. As Northcott (2014) observes, certain strands of Christian eschatology have been associated with environmental indifference, as the focus shifts from the present world to a future



heavenly reality. However, other scholars argue that biblical eschatology, properly understood, emphasizes not destruction but transformation and renewal (Wright, 2008).

It is within this theological tension that Isaiah 51:6 becomes particularly significant. The verse states: “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment... but my salvation will last forever” (New International Version). This passage presents a vivid image of cosmic transience, contrasting the impermanence of creation with the enduring nature of divine salvation. Traditionally, this imagery has been interpreted as a reflection of divine sovereignty and the ultimate transformation of the cosmos.

However, in the context of contemporary ecological crisis, the metaphor of the earth “wearing out like a garment” invites renewed reflection. The image of a garment suggests gradual deterioration resulting from use, strain, and neglect. In a similar manner, the Earth today exhibits signs of ecological exhaustion due to human activities such as deforestation, pollution, and unsustainable consumption patterns. This parallel between biblical imagery and modern environmental realities underscores the relevance of Isaiah’s message for the present age.

The challenge, therefore, lies in interpreting this text in a way that is both faithful to its original context and responsive to contemporary concerns. Does Isaiah 51:6 merely describe an inevitable cosmic fate, or does it also serve as a warning about the consequences of human actions? Can the text be reread as a call to ecological responsibility rather than a justification for environmental neglect? These questions are particularly pertinent in the African context, where the effects of climate change are both immediate and severe.

African theology offers valuable resources for addressing these questions. Unlike Western dualistic frameworks that often separate the spiritual from the material, African worldviews emphasize the interconnectedness of all aspects of life. As Mbiti (1990) famously stated, “I am because we are,” highlighting the communal and relational nature of existence. This sense of interconnectedness extends to the natural world, which is often regarded as sacred and imbued with spiritual significance. Similarly, Bujo (2001) emphasizes that African ethics are grounded in relationships that include not only human beings but also the environment. Such perspectives provide a strong foundation for ecological responsibility, as environmental degradation is understood as a disruption of the moral and spiritual order.

Furthermore, African women theologians such as Oduyoye (2001) have highlighted the gendered dimensions of ecological crises, noting that women often bear the brunt of environmental degradation due to their roles in agriculture, water collection, and household management. This insight underscores the importance of integrating social justice into ecological theology, particularly in contexts where environmental and socio-economic vulnerabilities intersect.

In light of these considerations, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines biblical exegesis, theological analysis, and ecological hermeneutics. The aim is to reread Isaiah 51:6 in a manner that engages both its ancient context and its contemporary relevance. By incorporating African theological perspectives and case studies from Nigeria and other parts of the



continent, the paper seeks to demonstrate how biblical texts can inform practical responses to climate change.

Specifically, the study pursues three main objectives. First, it provides a detailed exegetical analysis of Isaiah 51:6, examining its literary, historical, and theological dimensions. Second, it explores the relationship between biblical eschatology and ecological crisis, critically evaluating interpretations that either hinder or promote environmental responsibility. Third, it integrates African theological insights and real-world case studies to develop a constructive ecological eschatology that emphasizes stewardship, justice, and hope.

Ultimately, this paper argues that Isaiah 51:6 should not be interpreted as a justification for ecological fatalism. Rather, it should be understood as a profound theological statement about the fragility of creation and the enduring nature of divine salvation. In an era marked by environmental uncertainty, such a reading calls for renewed commitment to caring for the Earth as a sacred trust. The metaphor of the earth growing old like a garment thus becomes not only a description of ecological decline but also a moral challenge to humanity to act responsibly in preserving the integrity of creation.

Conceptual Clarifications

A clear understanding of the key concepts employed in this paper is essential for situating the discussion within both theological and environmental discourse. This section therefore clarifies three central concepts: biblical eschatology, climate change and ecological crisis, and ecological hermeneutics, with particular attention to their relevance within the African context.

Biblical Eschatology: *Biblical eschatology refers to theological reflections on the “last things,” encompassing themes such as death, judgment, resurrection, and the ultimate destiny of humanity and the cosmos. Traditionally derived from the Greek term eschatos (meaning “last” or “final”), eschatology has been a central component of Christian theology, shaping beliefs about the culmination of history and the fulfillment of divine purposes (Erickson, 2013).*

In classical Christian thought, eschatology is often divided into individual eschatology (dealing with personal destiny after death) and cosmic eschatology (concerning the fate of the entire creation). The latter is particularly relevant to this study, as it addresses questions about the end, transformation, or renewal of the earth. Biblical texts such as Isaiah 51:6, 2 Peter 3:10, and Revelation 21:1 present imagery of cosmic dissolution and renewal, suggesting both discontinuity and continuity in God’s redemptive plan. Stressing on this, Okai (2026) emphasis on the need to receive this biblical education which is out to lead humanity to accept the moral values and norms stated in the Bible as the standard of wisdom, faith, and practice.

However, eschatological interpretation has not been uniform. Some traditions emphasize apocalyptic destruction, portraying the end of the world as a catastrophic event in which the current creation is completely annihilated. Others advocate a renewal or restoration model, in which creation is transformed and redeemed rather than destroyed (Wright, 2008). This distinction is crucial for ecological ethics. A purely destruction-oriented eschatology may foster indifference



toward environmental preservation, whereas a renewal-oriented eschatology encourages stewardship and care for creation.

Within African Christianity, eschatology often assumes a more holistic and existential dimension. Rather than being confined to future events, it is integrated into present realities and communal life. African theological perspectives emphasize the interconnectedness of the spiritual and material realms, thereby resisting dualistic interpretations that separate heaven from earth (Mbiti, 1990). As a result, the destiny of humanity is inseparable from the destiny of the environment.

Furthermore, African eschatological thought is deeply communal. Salvation is not merely an individual experience but a collective reality involving the restoration of relationships - between humans, God, ancestors, and the natural world (Bujo, 2001). This relational framework provides a strong ethical basis for environmental responsibility, as ecological degradation is seen as a disruption of the cosmic order established by God.

Climate Change and Ecological Crisis: *Climate change refers to long-term alterations in global or regional climate patterns, particularly those attributed to increased levels of atmospheric greenhouse gases produced by human activities. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change defines climate change as a significant variation in climate that persists for extended periods, typically decades or longer, and emphasizes the dominant role of anthropogenic factors in recent warming trends (IPCC, 2023).*

The concept of **ecological crisis** extends beyond climate change to include a wide range of environmental challenges such as deforestation, soil degradation, water scarcity, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Together, these issues constitute a systemic disruption of the Earth's ecological balance. Rockström et al. (2009) describe this condition in terms of "planetary boundaries," warning that human activities have pushed several Earth systems beyond safe limits.

In Africa, the ecological crisis is both environmental and socio-economic. The continent's reliance on natural resources for livelihoods makes it particularly vulnerable to climate variability. For instance, agriculture—largely rain-fed—accounts for a significant portion of employment and GDP in many African countries. Consequently, changes in rainfall patterns and temperature directly affect food security and economic stability (Niang et al., 2014).

Nigeria exemplifies the intersection of ecological and socio-economic challenges. Desertification in the north, flooding in coastal and urban areas, and environmental pollution in the Niger Delta highlight the diverse manifestations of ecological crisis within a single country. These environmental changes often exacerbate existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting the poor, women, and rural communities (Adelekan, 2016).

From a theological perspective, the ecological crisis raises questions about **human** responsibility, sin, and stewardship. Many scholars interpret environmental degradation as a consequence of human greed, overconsumption, and failure to exercise responsible dominion over



creation (Northcott, 2014). This interpretation aligns with biblical themes that associate sin with the disruption of harmony between humans and the natural world (Genesis 3).

Ecological Hermeneutics: *Ecological hermeneutics is an interpretive approach that rereads biblical texts in light of contemporary environmental concerns. It seeks to uncover ecological dimensions within scripture and to evaluate how biblical interpretations influence attitudes toward the environment (Horrell, Hunt, & Southgate, 2010).*

This approach emerged as part of the broader field of ecological theology, which aims to address the environmental crisis through theological reflection. Ecological hermeneutics challenges traditional anthropocentric readings of the Bible that prioritize human interests over the well-being of the Earth. Instead, it emphasizes the intrinsic value of all creation and the interconnectedness of life.

One of the key contributions of ecological hermeneutics is its critical engagement with problematic interpretations. For example, the dominion mandate in Genesis 1:28 has often been interpreted as granting humans unrestricted authority over nature. Ecological hermeneutics reinterprets this mandate as a call to responsible stewardship, highlighting the biblical emphasis on care, preservation, and accountability (Bauckham, 2010).

In the African context, ecological hermeneutics resonates strongly with indigenous worldviews that regard the Earth as sacred. Traditional African religions often emphasize harmony with nature, respect for land, and the spiritual significance of natural elements such as rivers, forests, and mountains (Mbiti, 1990). These perspectives complement biblical teachings and provide a culturally relevant framework for environmental ethics.

Moreover, African ecological hermeneutics is inherently contextual and practical. It does not merely reinterpret texts but seeks to address real-life challenges faced by communities. For instance, in regions affected by deforestation, biblical teachings on creation care can be used to promote reforestation initiatives. In areas experiencing water scarcity, scriptural themes of justice and stewardship can inspire equitable resource management.

Interconnection of Key Concepts

The three concepts discussed above—eschatology, ecological crisis, and ecological hermeneutics—are deeply interconnected. Biblical eschatology provides a theological framework for understanding the destiny of creation, while the ecological crisis represents the contemporary context in which this framework must be applied. Ecological hermeneutics serves as the bridge that connects these two, enabling a reinterpretation of biblical texts in ways that are relevant to present environmental challenges.

In this study, Isaiah 51:6 is examined at the intersection of these concepts. The verse's imagery of an aging earth is interpreted not only as an eschatological statement but also as a reflection of ecological realities. By applying ecological hermeneutics and incorporating African theological perspectives, the study seeks to develop an interpretation that is both contextually relevant and ethically constructive



Exegetical Analysis of Isaiah 51:6 with African Interpretive Insights

The theological foundation of this study rests upon a careful exegetical examination of Isaiah 51:6. The verse contains one of the most vivid depictions of cosmic transience in the Old Testament and provides a rich resource for theological reflection on environmental degradation and climate change. While the passage was originally addressed to the exilic community of Israel, its imagery of a fading heaven and an aging earth resonates strongly with contemporary ecological concerns. Through historical-critical analysis, literary interpretation, theological reflection, and African hermeneutical insights, this section seeks to uncover the meaning of Isaiah 51:6 and explore its relevance for understanding the current ecological crisis.

Literary Context of Isaiah 51:6

Isaiah 51:6 forms part of a larger section commonly identified as Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55), a collection of prophetic messages addressed primarily to the Jewish exiles in Babylon during the sixth century BCE. This section of Isaiah is characterized by themes of comfort, restoration, divine sovereignty, and hope. The prophet seeks to reassure a displaced and discouraged people that God remains faithful despite their suffering and that deliverance is imminent (Oswalt, 1998).

Chapter 51 specifically contains a series of exhortations calling Israel to trust in God's promises. The chapter alternates between reminders of God's past acts of salvation and assurances of future redemption. Isaiah 51:1–8 encourages the people to look beyond their present circumstances and place their confidence in God's enduring righteousness.

Within this literary framework, verse 6 functions as a contrast between the temporary nature of the created order and the eternal nature of God's salvation. The heavens and the earth, which appear permanent from a human perspective, are described as transient realities. In contrast, God's righteousness and salvation are presented as everlasting. This juxtaposition serves to strengthen the faith of the exilic community by directing their attention away from unstable earthly realities toward the enduring faithfulness of God (Childs, 2001).

The literary significance of the verse lies in its use of poetic imagery. Hebrew prophetic literature often employs metaphors and symbolic language to communicate theological truths. The imagery of smoke and worn-out garments creates a powerful visual representation of impermanence and decay, emphasizing the contrast between creation and Creator.

Historical Context of Isaiah 51:6

Understanding the historical setting of Isaiah 51:6 is essential for interpreting its meaning. The Babylonian exile represented one of the most traumatic events in Israel's history. Jerusalem had been destroyed, the temple lay in ruins, and many Israelites had been deported to Babylon. The apparent collapse of Israel's national and religious institutions raised profound questions about God's power and faithfulness.

In this context, the prophet sought to reassure the exiles that God's covenant promises remained intact. The nations that appeared powerful and permanent would eventually pass away, but God's purposes would endure. The imagery of cosmic dissolution was not intended primarily

as a prediction of environmental catastrophe but as a theological affirmation of divine sovereignty over all created things (Goldingay, 2005).

The ancient Near Eastern world often regarded heavenly bodies as symbols of permanence and divine power. By declaring that even the heavens would vanish like smoke, Isaiah emphasizes that nothing in creation can rival the eternal nature of God. The earth itself, despite its apparent stability, is subject to change and decay.

For the exilic audience, this message was profoundly comforting. Their circumstances appeared hopeless, yet the prophet reminded them that earthly powers and structures are temporary. God's salvation, by contrast, is everlasting.

Textual and Linguistic Analysis

The Hebrew text of Isaiah 51:6 contains several key expressions that illuminate the verse's meaning.

The command:

שִׂאוּ לְשָׁמַיִם עֵינֵיכֶם

(*se'u lashamayim eineikhem*)

translated as "Lift up your eyes to the heavens," functions as an invitation to contemplation. The audience is called to observe the created order and reflect upon its ultimate destiny.

The phrase:

כִּי שָׁמַיִם כָּעָשָׁן נִמְלָחוּ

(*ki shamayim ke'ashan nimlahu*)

literally means "the heavens will disappear like smoke." Smoke is a common biblical symbol of transience and impermanence. It appears briefly and then vanishes. The image suggests the temporary nature of even the most majestic aspects of creation.

The most significant expression for this study is:

וְהָאָרֶץ כַּבֵּגְדָה תִּבְלֶה

(*veha'aretz kabbegegdivleh*)

translated as "the earth will wear out like a garment."

The verb בָּלָה (**balah**) means "to wear out," "become old," "decay," or "deteriorate." It is often used to describe clothing that has become threadbare through prolonged use (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1907). The metaphor therefore conveys gradual decline rather than sudden destruction.



The image of a worn-out garment is particularly significant because garments deteriorate through continuous use and exposure. Unlike catastrophic destruction, this imagery suggests a process of aging and exhaustion. Such language has profound implications for ecological interpretation, as it parallels contemporary concerns about environmental degradation resulting from prolonged human exploitation of natural resources.

The verse concludes:

וְיִשׁוּעָתִי לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה
(vishu'ati le'olam tihyeh)

meaning "my salvation shall be forever."

The contrast is clear: while creation is subject to decay, God's saving activity remains eternal. The permanence of divine salvation stands in opposition to the impermanence of the material world.

Theological Themes in Isaiah 51:6

Divine Sovereignty

A central theme in Isaiah 51:6 is the sovereignty of God over creation. The heavens and earth are not self-sustaining realities but creations dependent upon God. Their eventual decay underscores their contingency and God's ultimate authority.

This theme is consistent throughout Isaiah. God is portrayed as the Creator who establishes and governs the cosmos (Isaiah 40:28; 45:12). The fading of creation does not signify divine weakness but rather affirms God's transcendence over the created order.

Human Mortality and Cosmic Impermanence

The imagery of an aging earth reminds readers that all created things are finite. Human beings often place confidence in material structures and institutions, assuming their permanence. Isaiah challenges this assumption by emphasizing the transient nature of all earthly realities.

This perspective has ethical implications. Recognition of impermanence should foster humility and responsible stewardship rather than arrogance and exploitation.

The Permanence of Divine Salvation

The ultimate focus of the verse is not destruction but hope. The fading heavens and aging earth are contrasted with God's everlasting salvation. The prophet directs attention away from temporary realities toward God's enduring righteousness.

This emphasis prevents an interpretation of the passage as purely pessimistic or catastrophic. Instead, the text balances realism about creation's fragility with confidence in divine redemption.



African Interpretive Insights

African biblical interpretation often emphasizes the relationship between scripture and lived experience. Rather than approaching the text as merely an ancient document, African hermeneutics seeks to understand how biblical teachings address contemporary social realities (Ukpong, 2001).

From an African perspective, the metaphor of the earth wearing out like a garment resonates strongly with current environmental challenges. Many African communities witness firsthand the effects of deforestation, desertification, flooding, and environmental pollution. The image of an aging earth therefore speaks directly to their experiences.

Mbiti (1990) observes that traditional African worldviews emphasize the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, and the spiritual realm. The environment is not viewed merely as a collection of resources but as an integral part of the community of life. Environmental degradation is therefore understood not only as a physical problem but also as a spiritual and moral crisis.

Similarly, Bujo (2001) argues that African ethics are fundamentally relational. Human beings exist within networks of relationships that include the natural world. Actions that damage the environment disrupt these relationships and undermine communal well-being.

When read through this lens, Isaiah 51:6 becomes more than a statement about future cosmic transformation. It serves as a warning against practices that contribute to the deterioration of creation. The image of a worn-out garment can be interpreted as reflecting the consequences of irresponsible stewardship and ecological neglect.

Ecological Relevance of Isaiah 51:6

Contemporary ecological crises give renewed significance to Isaiah's imagery. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion all contribute to the perception that the earth is indeed "wearing out."

However, the text should not be interpreted as legitimizing environmental destruction. The fact that creation is temporary does not diminish its value. Throughout scripture, creation is consistently affirmed as good and worthy of care (Genesis 1:31; Psalm 24:1).

A constructive ecological reading recognizes that Isaiah's metaphor highlights both the fragility of creation and the responsibility of humanity. The earth's vulnerability calls for stewardship rather than exploitation. The permanence of God's salvation does not absolve humanity of responsibility but provides a foundation for hope-filled action.

In the context of climate change, Isaiah 51:6 challenges believers to acknowledge environmental realities while remaining committed to the preservation of creation. The verse invites a balance between eschatological hope and ecological responsibility.



The exegetical analysis of Isaiah 51:6 reveals a profound theological message concerning the transience of creation and the permanence of divine salvation. Situated within the context of Israel's exile, the verse reassured a suffering community that God's purposes would endure despite the instability of earthly realities. Its imagery of the earth wearing out like a garment conveys gradual deterioration and impermanence, themes that resonate powerfully with contemporary ecological concerns.

African interpretive perspectives further enrich this understanding by emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, and the divine. In the context of climate change, Isaiah's metaphor serves not as a justification for environmental neglect but as a call to responsible stewardship. The verse reminds believers that while creation is fragile and finite, it remains part of God's good creation and therefore deserving of care. Consequently, Isaiah 51:6 provides a valuable theological foundation for developing an ecological ethic that combines eschatological hope with environmental responsibility.

Rereading Isaiah 51:6 in the Age of Climate Change

The accelerating climate crisis has prompted scholars, theologians, and environmental activists to revisit sacred texts in search of ethical and theological resources for addressing ecological degradation. Among such texts, Isaiah 51:6 has gained renewed relevance because of its striking imagery of a fading heaven and an aging earth. While traditionally interpreted as an eschatological statement concerning the transient nature of creation and the permanence of divine salvation, contemporary environmental realities invite a fresh reading of the passage. Climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, deforestation, and environmental pollution have made the metaphor of the earth "wearing out like a garment" particularly resonant in the twenty-first century.

A contextual rereading of Isaiah 51:6 does not abandon its original meaning but seeks to understand how its theological message speaks to present ecological challenges. Ecological hermeneutics emphasizes that biblical texts should be interpreted in ways that address contemporary realities while remaining faithful to their historical and literary contexts (Horrell et al., 2010). In the context of climate change, Isaiah's imagery becomes more than a description of cosmic impermanence; it becomes a prophetic lens through which the current ecological crisis can be understood and evaluated.

The Earth Wearing Out: From Prophetic Imagery to Ecological Reality

Isaiah's declaration that "the earth will wear out like a garment" presents a vivid picture of deterioration and decline. The metaphor of a garment is significant because garments do not usually disappear instantly; rather, they gradually weaken through prolonged use, exposure, and neglect. The image therefore suggests a process of aging and deterioration rather than sudden destruction.

This imagery closely parallels contemporary environmental realities. Scientific evidence demonstrates that the Earth's ecosystems are under increasing pressure due to human activities. Rising global temperatures, melting glaciers, deforestation, ocean acidification, and species



extinction indicate that the natural world is experiencing unprecedented stress (IPCC, 2023). The planet appears to be "wearing out" under the weight of unsustainable patterns of production and consumption.

The concept of ecological degradation is particularly visible in Africa. Desertification in the Sahel region, recurrent droughts in East Africa, and coastal erosion in West Africa provide tangible examples of environmental decline. In Nigeria, the shrinking of Lake Chad, severe flooding in coastal cities, and environmental pollution in the Niger Delta illustrate the reality of an earth that appears increasingly fragile (Adelekan, 2016; UNEP, 2011).

From this perspective, Isaiah's metaphor acquires contemporary relevance. Although the prophet was not addressing climate change in the modern scientific sense, the imagery he employed speaks powerfully to the experience of ecological deterioration. The earth's aging is no longer merely a future possibility but a present reality witnessed in communities across the globe.

Climate Change as a Theological and Moral Crisis

Climate change is often discussed in scientific, economic, and political terms. However, many theologians argue that it must also be understood as a moral and spiritual crisis. Environmental degradation reflects patterns of greed, exploitation, and disregard for the well-being of future generations. Pope Francis (2015) argues that the ecological crisis is fundamentally linked to a moral failure in humanity's relationship with creation.

A rereading of Isaiah 51:6 highlights this moral dimension. The image of a worn-out earth raises questions about human responsibility. While the text originally emphasizes the transient nature of creation, contemporary readers cannot ignore the fact that human actions significantly contribute to environmental decline. Climate change is not simply a natural process; it is largely driven by anthropogenic factors such as fossil fuel consumption, deforestation, industrial pollution, and unsustainable development practices (IPCC, 2023).

In African theology, environmental degradation is often interpreted as a disruption of relationships. According to Bujo (2001), African ethics emphasize interconnectedness among God, humanity, and nature. Harm inflicted upon the environment therefore represents a violation of the moral order established by God. Climate change is not merely a scientific problem but a manifestation of broken relationships and communal irresponsibility.

This perspective challenges Christians to move beyond passive observation and recognize their ethical obligations toward creation. If human actions contribute to the earth's deterioration, then environmental stewardship becomes a theological imperative rather than an optional concern.

Moving Beyond Eschatological Fatalism

One of the challenges in Christian environmental ethics is the persistence of eschatological fatalism. Some believers interpret biblical references to cosmic destruction as evidence that environmental decline is inevitable and therefore not worth resisting. According to this view, efforts to preserve the earth are ultimately futile because the world is destined to pass away.



Such interpretations have been criticized by numerous theologians. Wright (2008) argues that Christian eschatology is not centered on the abandonment of creation but on its redemption and renewal. Similarly, Bauckham (2010) contends that biblical hope should inspire care for creation rather than indifference toward it.

A contextual reading of Isaiah 51:6 supports this perspective. Although the verse acknowledges the transience of creation, its primary emphasis is not destruction but divine salvation. The text contrasts the fading earth with God's enduring righteousness and saving power. The focus is therefore on hope rather than despair.

Moreover, the broader biblical narrative consistently affirms the value of creation. Genesis portrays the world as "very good" (Genesis 1:31), while Revelation envisions the emergence of a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1). These texts suggest transformation and restoration rather than complete annihilation.

For African Christians, this distinction is particularly important. Communities already facing the devastating effects of climate change cannot afford theological frameworks that encourage passivity. Instead, eschatological hope must become a source of motivation for environmental action and resilience.

African Perspectives on the Aging Earth

African worldviews offer valuable insights for rereading Isaiah 51:6 in the context of climate change. Traditional African cosmologies generally view humanity as part of an interconnected web of relationships involving the divine, ancestors, community, and nature (Mbiti, 1990). The earth is not merely an object to be exploited but a sacred gift entrusted to human care.

This understanding resonates strongly with ecological theology. The deterioration of the environment is seen not only as a physical problem but also as a spiritual and communal crisis. When rivers become polluted, forests disappear, or farmland becomes infertile, the consequences extend beyond economics to affect cultural identity, social cohesion, and spiritual well-being.

The experience of communities in the Niger Delta illustrates this reality. Decades of oil exploration have resulted in extensive environmental damage, including contaminated water sources, destroyed farmlands, and loss of biodiversity (UNEP, 2011). For many local communities, these environmental changes represent not only economic hardship but also the disruption of traditional relationships with the land.

Similarly, desertification in northern Nigeria has forced many communities to migrate, contributing to conflicts over land and resources. Such examples demonstrate that environmental degradation affects every dimension of human life.

A rereading of Isaiah 51:6 from an African perspective therefore highlights the urgency of ecological stewardship. The image of an aging earth is not merely symbolic; it reflects the lived experiences of millions of Africans confronting environmental decline.



Isaiah 51:6 and Ecological Stewardship

The metaphor of the earth wearing out like a garment also invites reflection on stewardship. In biblical thought, humanity is entrusted with responsibility for creation. Genesis 2:15 describes human beings as caretakers placed in the garden "to work it and take care of it." This stewardship mandate remains relevant in the age of climate change.

Isaiah 51:6 reminds believers that creation is fragile and finite. Recognizing this fragility should encourage responsible management of natural resources. Rather than viewing the earth as an inexhaustible reservoir of wealth, humanity must acknowledge ecological limits and pursue sustainable practices.

Practical expressions of ecological stewardship include:

- Reforestation and afforestation programs.
- Sustainable agricultural practices.
- Reduction of pollution and waste.
- Conservation of biodiversity.
- Climate adaptation initiatives.
- Environmental education within churches and communities.

African churches have increasingly embraced such initiatives. In Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, faith-based organizations are participating in environmental conservation projects, tree-planting campaigns, and climate awareness programs (Gathogo, 2018). These efforts demonstrate how theology can inspire practical responses to ecological challenges.

Hope, Salvation, and Ecological Responsibility

The concluding portion of Isaiah 51:6 states: "But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail." This declaration shifts attention from environmental decline to divine faithfulness. While creation is subject to change and decay, God's redemptive purposes remain secure.

This theological hope is crucial for contemporary ecological discourse. Climate change can easily generate despair, especially when environmental problems appear overwhelming. However, biblical hope does not encourage passivity. Instead, it empowers action by affirming that human efforts participate in God's ongoing work of redemption (Moltmann, 2012).

For Christians, ecological responsibility is therefore an expression of faith. Caring for creation becomes part of witnessing to God's kingdom and participating in the restoration of the world. Hope in divine salvation does not negate environmental action; it provides the motivation and confidence necessary for sustained engagement.

Conclusion

Rereading Isaiah 51:6 in the age of climate change reveals the enduring relevance of biblical theology for contemporary ecological challenges. The image of the earth wearing out like a garment resonates powerfully with present experiences of environmental degradation and climate



instability. While the text originally emphasized the contrast between the transience of creation and the permanence of divine salvation, contemporary readers can also recognize its significance as a reminder of ecological fragility.

Rather than promoting fatalism, Isaiah 51:6 calls believers to responsible stewardship grounded in hope. African theological perspectives further enrich this interpretation by emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, and the divine. Together, these insights provide a foundation for an ecological ethic that combines eschatological hope with practical commitment to environmental care. In an era when the earth appears increasingly worn and vulnerable, Isaiah's prophetic vision challenges humanity to become faithful stewards of God's creation while trusting in the enduring reality of divine salvation.

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