

ACTIVISM, BIBLE, AND  
RESEARCH-BASED TEACHING

PRACTICAL APPROACHES FOR THE  
GLOBAL BIBLICAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

edited by  
Johanna Stiebert



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## DEDICATION

Critique of the Bible is not enough; ultimately, the critique needs to be turned to current issues and contemporary practices. Activism is about changing the world one inhabits, not about critiquing the world of the past.

From the classroom, to the campus, to the world... activism ripples outward, expanding circles of justice and inclusion.

(Darla Schumm and Jennifer L. Koosed)

“Activism” is the process and the way in which we enact our power. It may be intentional or not, it may take the form of organising in community, protests, Parliament, or in individual conversations, a comment in a class, being one who stands up in, or to society.

(Robyn Ashworth-Steen and Deborah Kahn-Harris)

**This volume is dedicated to activists and change-makers – past, present, and future – who repair our world.**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ADL	Anti-Defamation League
ANERELA+	African Network for Religious Leaders Living with HIV and AIDS
BAME	Black, Asian and minority ethnic
BCE	Before the Common Era
<i>BCT</i>	<i>The Bible and Critical Theory</i>
BDB	F. Brown, S. Driver and C. Briggs, <i>The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i> (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004, repr. From 1906 edn)
<i>BiAS</i>	<i>Bible in Africa Studies</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBS	Contextual Bible Study
CE	Common Era
<i>DSQ</i>	<i>Disability Studies Quarterly</i>
<i>ER</i>	<i>The Ecumenical Review</i>
FGD	focus group discussion
<i>FE</i>	<i>Feminist Economics</i>
<i>HTS</i>	<i>Hervormde teologiese studies</i>
<i>IBMR</i>	<i>International Bulletin of Mission Research</i>
INERELA+	International Network of Religious Leaders Living with HIV and AIDS
ISB	Institute for the Study of the Bible
<i>JAR</i>	<i>Journal of Africana Religions</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JBR</i>	<i>Journal of the Bible and Its Reception</i>
<i>JIBS</i>	<i>Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
<i>JSH</i>	<i>Journal of Social History</i>
LBC	Leo Baeck College
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society (of America)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NYT</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>
<i>OTE</i>	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
POC	person of colour
PRCIG	Publishing and Research Common Initiative Group
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SCM	Student Christian Movement
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London)
SOTS	Society for Old Testament Study
SPLC	Southern Poverty Law Center
<i>THE</i>	<i>Times Higher Education</i>

TRS	Theology and Religious Studies
<i>TSE</i>	<i>Theology &amp; Sexuality</i>
WBC	Westboro Baptist Church
WCC	World Council of Churches
<i>WCJT</i>	<i>The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching</i>

## FOREWORD

Richard Newton

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I am a New Testament scholar working in the American region known as ‘the South’. In political discourse, my environs are a place called ‘the Bible Belt’ for its strong affinity for biblicist customs. And eventually, local and global colleagues cannot help but ask me the question, ‘What is it like to teach the Bible there?’ *There*, of course, is a place they know as one where Black people were—and in more than a few ways, still are—subject to a tortuous fate. *There* is a place where the Bible is taken to be a serious matter. It was a cipher of life and death. It was fuel for the engine of the Civil Rights Movement.

I am haunted by this tension whenever I drive to Shuttlesworth International Airport in Birmingham, Alabama. For as I am trying to get away from *there* for whatever reason, I know I am moving past the jailhouses where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. paid a price for his witness. And as I leave my car in remote parking, I must pass the cemetery where the four little girls slain at 16th Street Baptist Church forever rest. In 1963, the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan bombed the Black congregation’s church, killing Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair. Such harrowing violence should intrinsically give us pause, but we should also ask why it is that these five would literally die to hear, share, and participate in, what James S. Bielo calls, ‘the social life of scriptures’.

Oh, the things people have done and are doing with the Bible *there*. My colleagues’ question has little to do with the Bible’s contents and everything to do with the Bible as a context for human striving. What they really want to know is what is my place in it given the trauma and triumphs of the testament borne out *there*. Is there understanding of the Bible—what it is and is not, what it means and how it works for them? If the answer is ‘no’, then for whom might there be no place and what violence is done to ensure this?

It is an intriguing question if we allow it to be. Yes, we could respond to it as a call to reexamine syllabi, scholarly canons, and methodological approaches. Sure, we can commit to reading the Bible more or better while conjuring memories of scriptural tragedies and utter refrains like ‘Never



Again!’ In fact, we might even take holy writ as inspiration for a new political imagination that we enact in the world around us. There are so many possibilities with how we might engage with the *Bible*. What is not an option is doing nothing. Even were we to abstain from learning the Bible as content, the Bible has a complicated place in our unfolding contexts. And we would do well to trace and sketch its place in the stories we write for ourselves and others. The question posed to me is not one that should be unique to my stereotyped circumstance. It is of relevance most especially where we have learned to think it otherwise.

The examples of activism in this volume help make the case for how that might be done. Our political aims, cultural backgrounds, and religious un/non/-affiliations may have us view the Bible differently. Yet the dynamics that perpetually bring the Bible into view evince—at least for me—a need to better understand how it works and how we might work it, for there also lie the myriad subtle ways that the Bible shapes, informs, and grips our strivings. Rest assured though that there is no doing nothing on this side of history over here or over there. This volume promises to put you at dis-ease, so that you can consider how you engage the Bible where you are. Before you is an opportunity to reflect more carefully, plan more creatively, and to plot more critically. And my hope for you, dear reader, is that this volume will be a sounding board that echoes the utterances you failed to hear, and a canvas for you to imagine what could be regarding those who have encountered the Bible wherever and whenever they are.

Richard Newton (University of Alabama, USA)

## FOREWORD

Emily Colgan

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As I write this, I am sitting in my office on a sprawling, leafy seminary campus, complete with wooden chapel and cloistered studies, situated in an affluent suburb in the heart of Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland). It is a little slice of England from a bygone age, which seems out of step with the urban growth that has sprung up around it. It is a beautiful place to work. But it also stands as a testament to the troublesome legacy of Christianity in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Throughout the nineteenth century, Christians acquired large tracts of land (like the one upon which my seminary stands),<sup>1</sup> which would, in time, come to richly endow church trust funds with little or no benefit to the *mana whenua*, the original owners of the land. This story is not unique to my context in Tāmaki Makaurau, or indeed to Aotearoa. Similar stories can be found in the trail of destruction left behind as Christianity accompanied European colonisation, stomping its way across the globe.

The Bible arrived—uninvited—onto the shores of Aotearoa, clutched in the hands of Christian missionaries whose interests and agendas were often closely aligned with the British colonial enterprise. As the settler presence increased and took root here, so too the Bible's stories and images began to seep into the *whenua* (land) and into the hearts and minds of those who inhabit these islands. While some (Māori and *tauiwi* or non-Māori) embraced this text as sacred scripture, finding within it inspiration

1. In some instances, land was bought (often at very low cost), in other instances, land was gifted. There are also instances where land was stolen. My own seminary sits upon land first acquired by the Crown from Ngāti Pāoa. The 'Kohimarama Block' (of about 400 acres), which would include what became the major portion of St John's College land, was sold by twenty-four *rangatira* (leaders) of Ngāti Pāoa to the Crown on 28 May 1841 for £100 worth of cash and additional goods. Bishop Selwyn purchased the site in 1844 for £428 10s. Over the next few years, Bishop Selwyn increased the St John's endowment to 1,330 acres. Allan K. Davidson, *Selwyn's Legacy: The College of St John the Evangelist, Te Waimate and Auckland 1843–1992, A History* (Auckland: The College of St John the Evangelist, 1993), pp. 45-47.

for movements of liberation, hope, protest, and resistance,<sup>2</sup> others employed it to further an agenda of domination and oppression. Thus, for example, in the 200 years since it was paddled ashore here, the Bible has fed into discourses which have enabled racism, queerphobia, ecocide, and gender inequalities, justified confiscation of Indigenous land, and sought to erase the language, culture, and spirituality of *tangata whenua* (people of the land). Despite Aotearoa now being one of the most secular nations in the world, the rhetorical power of the Bible lingers—for good or for ill—as a text that came to shape the narratives of this land.

If language works not only to reflect reality but to determine it,<sup>3</sup> the ubiquity of the Bible's images and ideas—even in so-called secular societies like Aotearoa—testifies to the success of the determinative quality of its language. Indeed, as biblical rhetoric was incorporated into the colonial processes of describing and naming this 'new-found' land at the edge of the world, the Bible came to play a significant role in determining colonial attitudes and behaviour towards this country. There can be no lived reality or praxis, argues Paul Ricœur, which is not already symbolically structured in some way.<sup>4</sup> And in Aotearoa—like many other lands characterised by a European colonial presence—the Bible became an important text (sign), which prefigured settler attitudes and actions.

This connection between biblical rhetoric and reality, however, would come to extend well beyond the Bible's foundational role in establishing colonial 'New Zealand' as the 'Britain of the South'.<sup>5</sup> With each and every reading, the Bible continues to shape the dominant ideological imaginaries of this country, as readers encounter its symbolic world(s), embodying and enacting its realities through the process of reading. Like God, whose words called creation into being in Genesis 1, so the symbolic systems of

2. See, for example, the prophetic movements of Te Kooti, Papahurihia, Rua Kēnana, and Rātana.

3. Aotearoa poet, Allen Curnow, quoted in Michael P. Jackson and Elizabeth Caffin, 'Poetry', in Terry Sturm (ed.), *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 448.

4. Paul Ricœur, 'The Creativity of Language', in Mario J. Valdés (ed.), *A Ricœur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 469-70.

5. The first *tauiwi* to arrive in Aotearoa was Dutch explorer Abel Tasman in 1642. The name 'New Zealand' comes from the Dutch 'Nieuw Zeeland', associating the land with a location in the Netherlands. Premier Julius Vogel's vision for Aotearoa was that it would become the 'Britain of the South' in both function and appearance. Quoted in Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 433.

biblical language help to ‘create’ and ‘re-create’ Aotearoa, contributing to the ever-expanding visions of reality here.<sup>6</sup>

The chapters in this book are significant because they take seriously this ‘world-creating power’ of biblical literature.<sup>7</sup> They take seriously the idea that the symbolic realities that appear in the Bible serve to shape individual and social perceptions of reality. And in recognising the determinative quality of biblical literature, they take seriously the qualitative impact of this text on the lived experience of those who participate in its rhetorical vision(s). The examples of activism contained in this volume help us to reflect critically on the ways in which the Bible has been used and misused in shaping/determining our contemporary realities. These contributors ask us to read the Bible as if lives depend on it—because all too often they do. The chapters should challenge, trouble, unsettle, and disorient us as we wrestle with the Bible’s legacy(s) in our own contexts. But I hope they will also inspire and impel us to harness the world-creating power of this ancient text to help shape new realities, which are liberative and life-giving for all—especially those who have been marginalised and oppressed by the Bible’s rhetoric. This is crucial and urgent work, and I wholeheartedly commend this volume to you.

Emily Colgan (Trinity Theological College, Aotearoa)

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6. The notion of ‘making’ and ‘re-making’ of the world through language is explored in Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (2nd edn; Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1976).

7. Dale Patrick and Allen Scult, *Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation* (Decatur, GA: Almond Press, 1990), p. 19.

AN AFRO-BIBLICAL READING OF  
GENESIS 2–3 IN RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

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*Abstract*

The primary focus of this paper is an Afro-biblical reading of Genesis 2–3, informed by indigenous epistemologies and in response to contemporary local and global environmental crises. Using the context of Uganda, it brings African spiritual sensitivities about nature into conversation with Genesis 2–3. Based on archival and ethnographic research, the questions directing the investigation are: how can African spirituality inform reading of Genesis 2–3? What is the significance of Afro-biblical reading in responding to the problems of climate change?

*Keywords*

Genesis 2–3; Afro-biblical reading; Uganda; indigenous epistemologies

*On Activism*

My activist contributions in this chapter focus on both inclusion and environmental protection. One in four Christians of the world is located on the continent of Africa. Uganda, where I live and work, is overwhelmingly Christian, with well over 80% of the population self-identifying as Christian in the last census.<sup>1</sup> Uganda has also been a focus of external Christian attention, with the film *God Loves Uganda* (2013) constituting one very widely circulated example of how Christianity in Uganda is depicted and regarded internationally. But religious and biblical studies *from Uganda* and *by Ugandans* is thin on the ground. Not only am I one of exceedingly few

1. See below and note 9.

biblical scholars in the entire country, research from Uganda, and from the continent of Africa more widely, is sorely under-represented in international scholarly forums. This chapter seeks to bring Afro-biblical perspectives, my own and those explored during ethnographic research, to a wider audience in the biblical studies academy and classroom. Moreover, given my focus on climate change, I endeavour to harness Afro-biblical perceptions of Genesis 2–3 and to direct them towards environmental protection in Uganda. This is because environmental destruction and extinction of species are having devastating impact on my country, its populations and lifeforms.

### *Introduction*

The central theme in Genesis 2–3 of ‘how it all started’ reverberates in contemporary climate change crises, as humanity battles environmental catastrophes,<sup>2</sup> sometimes alongside idealised hopes of restoring a paradisaical, Edenic past. Some Christians construct the crises in terms of humanity sinning against nature,<sup>3</sup> which, in turn, calls for a theology of remorse and responsibility, towards powering activism for change. This article uses the spiritual aspects which underlie contemporary African religious consciousness and worldviews, with particular focus on Ugandan contexts, in conjunction with sacred biblical text, to suggest ways forward for committed action on climate change and environmental protection. With this in mind, it embellishes the Bible story of Genesis 2–3 with indigenous knowledges to create what can be called an Afro-biblical ecological hermeneutic and spirituality.

### *Afro-Biblical Spirituality*

There is a distinctive new spirituality in contemporary post-colonial Ugandan societies, which I call ‘Afro-biblical’ or ‘Afro-Christian’ spirituality. It is a hybrid spirituality that stems from a union of African traditional and biblical or Christian spiritualities. It is a fusion of pre-colonial African and of Christian values (re)introduced to sub-Saharan Africa through European colonialism and missionary activities particularly in the 19th Century. This spirituality needs significant and specialised academic attention especially

2. The complexity of environmental crisis is well articulated by John T. Hardy, *Climate Change: Causes, Effects, and Solutions* (New York: Wiley, 2003).

3. In 2008, Pope Francis provided a new list of Seven Deadly Sins, which includes environmental degradation (see NPR, ‘Vatican Includes Drugs and Wealth in New Sin List’, 2008). According to papal assessment, human destruction of the environment has turned the planet into a ‘polluted wasteland full of debris, desolation and filth’. See Josephine McKenna, ‘Pope Francis says destroying the environment is a sin’, in *The Guardian* (1 September, 2016).

in contemporary quests for theoretical and ideological groundings in dealing with climate change. The few scholarly works on the subject are mostly descriptive, with limited emphasis on how Afro-biblical perspectives can offer a way towards activism and social justice. I seek to draw from and add to previous research, in the hope of harnessing energy and commitment central to faith towards mobilising activism for environmental repair in Uganda.

Suffice to say that the brutality with which European ideas were inseeded in Africa, accounts to a significant extent for the imperfect blend that is Afro-biblical spirituality. Many African Christians mimic European Christianity, rather than asserting their own, distinctive faith, infused with indigenous concepts and ideas. There is, however, nonetheless—sometimes public, sometimes furtive—crisscrossing of ideological borders.<sup>4</sup> Arguably, such crisscrossing is dangerous. It not only internalises value judgments that often condemn dearly-held beliefs, creating uncomfortable ambiguities, it also makes it difficult to form strong theological and ideological frameworks, including for dealing with climate change.

Dorothy Akoto-Abutiata's hermeneutic of grafting, which she applies to biblical and Ghanaian proverbs, challenges attitudes that demean African cultures.<sup>5</sup> She proposes a hermeneutic where African traditional and biblical elements coexist, where shoots from the Tree of Life from the Bible are grafted onto the African Tree of Life to create a vibrant and hybrid spirituality. Akoto-Abutiata argues that contemporary Afro-Christian hybridity is, however, often bizarre and corrupted, a product of poor or careless grafting. This is because in numerous ways missionary Christianity has undermined African cultures and knowledges.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Bible theology introduced to Africa had *already absorbed and grafted on European values*. Grafting onto an already grafted material thus produced a hybridity

4. Ugandan PhD candidate Annet Nadunga illustrates this phenomenon in her contextual study of 1 Samuel 28 in relation to divination practices in Uganda. She observes that although divination is an ideologically denigrated practice (thanks to colonial missionary teachings that made visiting a diviner a satanic act), Ugandan (possibly like many other African) Christians are at the same time (regardless of their socio-economic status or presentation as more 'Western') likely to visit and use services of traditional diviners to deal with a wide range of problems, including political, medical and personal ones. Nadunga, 'A Contextual Study of 1 Samuel 28 in Relation to Divination in Contemporary African Society' (Kyambogo University, 2019), pp. 114-16.

5. Dorothy Akoto-Abutiata, *Proverbs and the African Tree of Life Grafting Biblical Proverbs on to Ghanaian Eve Folk Proverbs* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 1-3.

6. For more illustrations, see: Matsobane J. Manala, 'The impact of Christianity on sub-Saharan Africa', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 39 (2013), pp. 285-302; Fidelis Nkomazana and Senzokuhle Doreen Setume, 'Missionary colonial mentality and the expansion of Christianity in Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1800 to 1900', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 29 (2016), pp.29-55.

which in Uganda has resulted in conflicting ideologies and spiritualities. Furthermore, the careless grafting also uprooted African epistemologies, which became at best loosely attached to European ones. This led to weakened ideo-theological grounding that elevated Europeanised biblical stories over African ones. It is my aim, like that of other African scholars,<sup>7</sup> to challenge this. It is the focus of this chapter to show the wisdom of a mutually infused, firmly grafted spirituality, where the Bible and Ugandan ways of life are not treated as ‘either, or’ but together form a theology that is able to generate theological knowledge to combat crises of life, poverty, disease, and climate change affecting Uganda and the entire continent of Africa.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of effecting the vital activism that is needed, such a spirituality is likely to have more impact than a separation of ‘Bible/Christianity’ and ‘African knowledges’—if this were even possible. In African thought, spiritual realities are in nature and use natural phenomena to reveal, manifest, communicate and commune with humanity. In African religious consciousness, the God of Genesis 2 and 3 can be conceptualised as omnipresent and embedded in nature. Harnessing both together could generate the energy and vitality needed in our time of crisis.

The chapter is based on data generated from a study I conducted in Uganda in 2022. Participants in the study were all Christians. Indeed, Christians constitute the dominant majority (85%) of Uganda’s population.<sup>9</sup> In this demographic, the Bible enjoys high reverence as the authoritative word of God, as well as sometimes as a weapon in spiritual warfare. Although internally variegated, diverse, and multiethnic, Ugandans tend to share the view that nature is or reflects the divine; this emerged clearly in my research. But dual identity was also pronounced; hence, my respondents would choose to answer questions either ‘as a Christian’ or, ‘as an African’. Without prompting, recurrent expressions were along the lines of, ‘should I answer as a Christian or African?’ and ‘...as a Christian, I say... but as an African, I say...’. Rather than acknowledging a single identity (as Afro-biblical), responses often presented an ‘either/or’ situation.

7. See Joel Mokhoathi, ‘African Christianity: Intersections between Culture and Identity among Amakhosa’, *Scriptura* 120 (2021), pp. 1-11 and Collis G. Machoko, *African Traditional Religion and Christian Religion: Integration of Spiritual Powers* (New York: American Star 2010).

8. For a model, see Phemelo O. Marumo, ‘Christianity and African Traditional Religion in Dialogue. An Ecological Future for Africa’ (PhD Dissertation. North-West University, 2016).

9. Statistics, ‘The National Population and Housing Census 2014 - Main Report’ (Government of Uganda, 2016).



*Methodology*

My initial aim of using the South African Ujamaa Centre model of contextual Bible study (CBS), alongside focus group discussion (FGD) between socially engaged scholars and ‘ordinary’ readers,<sup>10</sup> did not yield meaningful results. It proved unsuitable for some of the potential participants in terms of availability of time and preferred anonymity. Consequently, I redesigned my method and used alongside interactive social media focus groups. I created four WhatsApp platforms and populated these with numerous scholars, students and religious leaders (i.e., socially engaged scholars), alongside ‘ordinary’ readers. This transpired in a far greater number of participants (well over one hundred) than a viable CBS and FGD would have permitted. Many contributors who preferred to have their responses anonymised, because they were afraid of backlash if their views conflicted with dominant Christian ideologies and values, took part. Some participated only in the group forums, others also communicated with me privately.

I applied for and received ethical clearance for my investigation from the University of Leeds.<sup>11</sup> Selection of participants was by purposive sampling and snowballing. To begin with, I invited Ugandan scholars of religion and religious leaders, alongside ‘ordinary readers’, in my contact list, creating four groups of comparable size. Each group constituted a forum, which was diverse in terms of ethnicity,<sup>12</sup> class and gender. I sent each forum an introductory note to explain the purpose of the research. There was no deception in the study. Group members were requested to:

1. confirm willingness to participate in the study; everyone was at liberty to exit at any point;
2. recommend people (in their phone contacts) who would be suitable for the study. (Multiple participants were recommended by various group participants.)
3. adhere to the rules of the platform: not to use the platform for any communications other than the intended purpose; to be respectful of one another’s views; to maintain confidentiality and not share any information outside the group. (Upon completion of the study, the platforms were disbanded; this was communicated at the outset.)

10. For more detail on CBS, and on the categories of ‘socially engaged scholars’ and ‘ordinary readers’, see Chapter 5 in this volume. by Gerald O. West and Sithembiso Zwane.

11. My work was conducted during my tenure as virtual visiting research fellow (2022) for the Leeds Arts and Humanities Research Institute and Leeds University Centre for African Studies.

12. All participants were Ugandan. I am referring here to intra-ethnicity within Uganda.

All four discussion groups were anonymised. Each group ranged between 25 and 36 participants in number, totaling 120 participants. Alongside the introductory note, each group received an abridged Bible text of Genesis 2–3, followed by open-ended questions designed to explore responses, inclusive of African spiritualities, to the biblical passage. Some respondents posted to the forums, others contacted me directly. In multiple cases, I conducted follow-up interviews to obtain more detailed information. Interviewees who agreed to be named are named.

I observed that most respondents, particularly in the group forums, avoided questions that aimed to relate African traditional religions with Genesis 2–3, preferring to treat the two spheres as though they were separate. For instance, the question ‘From our reading of Genesis, how does the story’s mention of a Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil resonate with African conceptualisation of sacred trees?’ elicited almost no responses on any of the platforms. I asked a similar question about snakes. Those who did respond, preferred in-boxing me, and eventually explained privately their discomfort at publicly expressing what might be seen as allegiance to African traditional, as opposed to biblical, beliefs. It emerged, however, that all my respondents had knowledge (often extensive knowledge) and often some attachment to African traditional beliefs.

### *Contextual Realities*

Environment degradation and climate change is real in Uganda and is having calamitous impact.<sup>13</sup> Many forest reserves—including sacred trees and forests—have been destroyed.<sup>14</sup> Air pollution is severe, with Kampala, the capital city, ranked one of the most polluted cities in the world: About 28,000 people die annually due to air pollution.<sup>15</sup> Ugandan bodies of

13. This is attested by multiple recent news reports. E.g., Richard Davies, ‘Uganda—Deadly Floods and Landslides in Western Region’ (2022); Richard Davies, ‘Uganda—15 Killed in Massive Landslide in Kasese’ (2022); Reuters, ‘More than 200 people die as drought ravages northeast Uganda’ (2022).

14. John Okot, ‘Northern Uganda’s revered shea trees are under threat from climate change and illegal loggers who turn the wood into charcoal and sell the fuel for use in cooking’ (Thomson Reuters Foundation News, 2022); A.C. Hamilton, *Deforestation in Uganda* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1984); Daniel Waiswa, *et al.*, ‘Drivers of Deforestation in the Lake Victoria Crescent, Uganda’, *Journal of Sustainable Forestry* 34 (2015), pp. 259-75, Gombya-Ssembajjwe. ‘Sacred Forests in Modern Ganda Society’ (paper presented at FAO Forestry Working Group on Common Property, Oxford, 15–18 December, 1994).

15. Elias Biryabarema, ‘Air Pollution: These low-cost sensors are helping Uganda tackle rising air pollution’ (2022); Serginho Roosblad, ‘Pollution is Silent Killer in Uganda’ (Voa News, 2015).

water and land are becoming increasingly polluted, including with plastics. Depletion of biodiversity is rapid and severe.

Faced with calamities like floods, droughts, epidemics, famine and death, Ugandans have turned again to ancient questions: How did this start? What was there in the beginning? What have we done wrong? What should we do? How much time is left? African religious thoughts have also come to the fore alongside this; hence, the destruction of sacred trees and forests in various parts of Uganda<sup>16</sup> has brought to the fore conflicts between religious and economic forces. Though some respondents in my study appreciated economic development, they also attributed calamities in their regions to inattention to sacred traditional protocols. In a study conducted by the National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) around Lake Albert (formerly, Lake Mwitanzige), respondents attributed decreased water levels of the lake, and drying up of all the eleven rivers, tributaries and swamps that feed into Lake Albert, to spirits of the land angry at human transgression. They reported that humans had profaned sacred places around the bodies of water through sexual immorality, which angered the gods and moved them to withdraw from protecting nature.<sup>17</sup> One of respondents in the NAPE report suggested prayers:

We have to visit the shrine embedded within that sacred natural site and ask the earth to forgive her people after, for example, crop fields are attacked by pests and or when there is too much dry spell like today. We go and hold a traditional prayer near the lake, so rain comes, and rivers remain alive.<sup>18</sup>

During my research, Ugandan communities were hit with floods in Mbale city, which killed many people. The habitations which lie in the Mt Elgon area, beneath Wanale Hill, were flooded and profoundly damaged by a massive landslide. Waters filled the streams of Namatala and Nabuyonga causing a humanitarian crisis. This was spiritualised by my respondents in both African traditional and Christian terms, with both pointing to divine wrath. One of the victims, directly affected by the flooding, informed this study

16. For instance, in the construction of the Kampala-Mpigi Express, the Nabukalu sacred tree was cut by Chinese contractors under court order amidst protests by local people, who cherished the tree as a religious site. Brian A. Kesiime and A. Ssenkibirwa, ‘‘Shs500m sacred tree’ finally uprooted’, *Daily Monitor*, 2022; Emmy D. Ojara, ‘Outrage as Gov’t Destroys Thousands of ‘Sacred Traditional Trees’ in Acholi’, (2022).

17. NAPE, ‘Lake Albert Ruined by Lost Traditional Practices’ (2022).

18. *Ibid.* Regarding climate change, Ezra Chitando sagely advises praying for courage. See his, ‘Praying for Courage African Religious Leaders and Climate Change’, *The Ecumenical Review* 69.3 (2017), pp. 425-36. On prayers as panacea, see Sonene Nyawo, ‘Are Prayers a Panacea for Climate Uncertainties? An African Traditional Perspective from Swaziland: Are Prayers a Panacea?’, *The Ecumenical Review* 69.3 (2017), pp. 362-74.

saying, ‘God is angry with the people of Mbale because of rampant prostitution and corruption. People of Bugisu need to repent and turn back to God’.<sup>19</sup> Grace Namalwa, a resident of Namatala (one of the suburbs severely hit) narrated how she and her children survived death: ‘It is because I have accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and saviour... Jesus to me was the Ark of Noah!’<sup>20</sup> James Wafula (a Pentecostal Christian who pastors a church), when asked about the natural disaster, also referred to the Bible, that God since the biblical days has punished sinners by either causing drought and famine or ‘opening full taps’ of rain.<sup>21</sup> Wafula quoted 2 Chron. 7.14<sup>22</sup> to urge Ugandans to pray and repent of their sins.<sup>23</sup>

Comparable ideas are derived from African traditional spirituality, such as by Bosco Bwambale of the Rwenzori region who explained that Kithasamba and Nyamusya are the principal deities in charge of the environment, forests, water streams, soils, and other life forms. The Bayira people in this region are Christian and have also established a religious communion with these deities, as well as ethical codes which are environmentally friendly. Consequently, people who climb the local mountains are forbidden from setting the vegetation on fire lest they sin against Kithasamba.<sup>24</sup> Floods, according to the Bayira people occur when Nyamusya is upset, because Nyamusya influences other deities, *Kumula* and *Ngwangwa* (responsible for landslides), to cause devastation.<sup>25</sup>

This understanding can be a useful resource in addressing environmental destruction, more so when such destruction is reconceptualised as constituting sin against God or the gods.<sup>26</sup> Sin for many Ugandans is concep-

19. Alice Nabuduwa, discussing the reasons for the floods, in an Interview with me (2022). Interestingly, the sin that would have led to such profound divine wrath is presumed, both in the NAPE report and in my investigation, to be of a sexual nature. Clearly, sexual immorality is assumed to have particularly harmful consequence.

20. Grace Namalwa, in an interview with me (2022). Notable here is how positive happenings (to do with rescue) are associated with Christianity and the Bible (i.e. Jesus and Noah’s ark). Negative events are not associated thus.

21. James Wafula, in an interview with me (2022).

22. The verse reads, ‘if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land’ (NRSV).

23. Wafula’s belief is typical of many Ugandans—and indeed African Christians and Christians worldwide more generally. Climatic events are interpreted in religious terms, as caused by God. See the contributions of various writers in *The Ecumenical Review* 69.3 (2017).

24. Bwambale, *et al.*, ‘Foundations of indigenous knowledge on disasters due to natural hazards: lessons from the outlook on floods among the Bayira of the Rwenzori region’, *Disasters* 47.1 (2023), pp. 181-204.

25. *Ibid.*

26. On sin in African traditional contexts, see J. Omoşade Awolalu, ‘Sin and Its

tualised more immediately in terms of sexual immorality, corruption, or murder, without indication that destructiveness against the environment is tantamount to sin.<sup>27</sup> But by drawing on and amplifying biblical *and* African traditional spiritualities this can be instilled with beneficial results for the natural environment of Uganda.

### *Genesis 2–3*

The narrative of the first human couple is one of the best-known stories of the entire Bible. It is widely drawn on to defend monogamous, heteronormative marriage. But my question at hand is how can a reading of Genesis 2–3 be redirected to achieve an Afro-ecological hermeneutics? To deal with this, let me begin with a case for lexical and theological correspondence between Hebrew Bible and Ugandan context. The aim of this is to show how relevant the story is for Ugandans and for addressing contemporary ecological problems in Uganda.

First, Elohim (אֱלֹהִים) is transmitted in translations monotheistically as God, but the term is technically a plural (for either El or Eloha) and might also embrace pantheistic ideas of multiple gods.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, the tetragrammaton יהוה commonly translated ‘the LORD’ or transliterated YHWH, poses a semantic problem. It is helpful to read יהוה as a causative (hifil) verbal form of the Hebrew verbal root היה (‘to be’) to create the sense of ‘the one bringing into being, life-giver, one who brings to pass’.<sup>29</sup> In this way, Hebrew Elohim YHWH, can be aligned with divine causal forces of African conceptions of nature.

This religious consciousness is well encapsulated in the African philosophy *Neteru*,<sup>30</sup> which denotes a causal force, ‘the active power which produces and creates things in regular recurrence, which bestows new life ...

Removal in African Traditional Religion’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44.2 (1976), pp. 275-87.

27. One good example is when Christian leaders and clerics attributed a recent Ebola outbreak to God’s wrath against the *nyege nyege* festival, which was believed to have promoted sexual immoralities among other evils. Brian Nyanzi, ‘There will be no more Nyege Nyege festival in Uganda—Pastors’ (Kingdom Media, 2022); Mourice Muhoozi, ‘Sunday sermons: Clerics direct anger, frustration to government for promoting immorality through Nyege Nyege festival’ (Watchdog News, 2022).

28. Kogan Leonid, *Genealogical Classification of Semitic: The Lexical Isoglosses* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

29. Brown, *et al.*, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon: with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

30. In embodying Osiris and other ancient Egyptian deities, *Neteru* is conceived by Thom Cavalli as a distinctively African primordial creative idea. Osiris is embodied in nature and was responsible for agriculture and activities around the Nile. See Cavalli,

and gives back ... youthful vigor'.<sup>31</sup> The imagery of Eden is compatible with *Neteru* in that both convey a sacred environment, with mysteries: fertile waters, trees of life and of knowledge of good and evil, a serpent that knows secrets of nature, fruits and food which are provided by the gods in nature; a serene environment where humans live at peace with and find favour of their gods. Now, the Bible is becoming less European and more African, its wisdom aligned with an African concept, *Neteru*, not with Western missionaries.

The Hebrew words שֶׁרֶפֶן and לֶכֶן can also be contextually reinterpreted. The word שֶׁרֶפֶן is commonly translated 'serpent' or 'snake', but there is reason to associate the root letters also with divination (cf. Gen. 30.27; 44.5),<sup>32</sup> to be understood as an act of gaining insights into something hidden. Divination, as already mentioned, has deep roots in African religious tradition and here finds resonance also in the biblical text. לֶכֶן meanwhile carries a meaning of 'eat(ing)' but can also mean 'destruction' (cf. Deut. 32.42, 2 Sam. 11.23; Isa. 1.7, Jer. 8.16). Read together, שֶׁרֶפֶן and לֶכֶן may convey the idea of humans developing ideas or insights (שֶׁרֶפֶן) of destroying (לֶכֶן) the sacred tree of Eden.<sup>33</sup> These meanings could on the one hand affirm divination, a practice colonial powers maligned in African contexts but which is associated in the Bible with special insight, and on the other, can reveal that the hidden insight of the story points to the wrongfulness of destroying or eating from sacred trees. This once more affirms the sanctity of nature in Afro-biblical terms.

#### *From Religio-Philosophical to Eco-Spiritual Perspectives*

Participants in the study agreed that natural features, like trees and bodies of water, are, like animals, inhabited by, or the dwellings of, spirits. They are revered and worshipped in their own right or serve as worship places where rituals are conducted. Participants agreed, too, that inappropriate conduct against nature can have calamitous consequence. Throughout the study trees were again and again referred to as epitomising spirituality. The

*Embodying Osiris: The Secrets of Alchemical Transformation* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Book, 2010), pp. 45-46; 48, 79.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 58. Cavalli argues that Egyptian (i.e. African) *Neteru* underlies Latin *natura* and English 'nature' (*ibid.*, 30).

32. In these verses the meaning of divination is clearly intended. Moreover, divination is associated with power and has positive association. The word with this meaning has the same root letters as those for the word translated 'serpent' in the early Genesis chapters.

33. See also, John L. Ronning, 'The Curse on the Serpent (Genesis 3:15) in Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics' (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997), p. 71.

*Nakayima* tree in Mubende district and others, like *Nabukalu* and *Saka* in Mpigi and Arua districts respectively, were mentioned frequently. Trees, it was said, represent presence: either of a deity or of ancestors. *Nakayima* and *Nabukalu* represent respected queens who are deified.<sup>34</sup> The Bakiga of Western Uganda would plant *ekitoma* trees, while Baganda in central Uganda would plant either a *Mutuba* tree or a *Muwafu* tree when somebody dies to represent or embody the deceased's soul. The idea is premised on the belief that African ancestors dwell in trees and forested areas.<sup>35</sup> This idea not only informs the concept but more so the protection of spiritual or sacred forests like *Magezigomu*, *Nakayaga* and *Mukasa*.

Trees and plants were accorded medicinal and divination values by multiple respondents. Carol Nandutu related in one FGD that among the Bagisu people (of Eastern Uganda), a pumpkin is used to locate victims of drowning. According to her, when someone has drowned, a pumpkin is thrown in the water and will move on the water and then stop in the exact place where the body is located. Another respondent, from the same region under discussion, stated:

From my Bugisu community, there is a tree called *kitugutu* which is believed to cure mumps commonly in children. The victim is instructed to go early morning and run around that tree and suddenly their health is restored. Meaning this tree is believed to have extraordinary powers that mere running around it restores one's health. We are also prohibited from using wood from this tree as firewood because they are believed to be powerful and using them could be tantamount to misfortune.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, Cathy Akello from the Gulu district (in Northern Uganda) observed:

In my Acholi culture, we strongly believe that there are supernatural powers that reside in the roots and tissues of these plants and of course it's a divine gift to humans on earth. Medicine men and women can comprehend the spirit world and the real and ... maintenance of the balance between the two. And indeed, in my culture - Acholi - some plants are seen as gods or provide way to god. Therefore, there are plants that have divine powers. Our capacity to recognise and seek out the sacred is one of the basic drives that make up the fabric of humans...<sup>37</sup>

Besides plants, animals too are accorded spiritual significance in many parts of Africa, including Uganda. All participants acknowledged that animals have spiritual knowledge and capacities. Among other things, animals and birds are a gateway to hidden truths and knowledge. Sheep, goats,

34. Semakula Musoke, in an interview with me (2022).

35. Enock Kisekka, in an interview with me (2022).

36. Annet Nadunga, in an interview with me (2022)..

37. Catherine Akello, in an interview with me (2022).

and chickens, for instance, are used for divination practices. Other creatures, like dogs, cats and owls, are believed to have the ability to detect when someone is about to die. Reptiles, like snakes, lizards and tortoises, are presumed to be mediators of communications from the divine sphere. One participant observed:

we grew up knowing that when a snake comes to your home it is not in vain, there must be something it is communicating. Therefore, when you see one, we were told not to scream but keep quiet and go away from where it is, and eventually the snake would also continue its way without causing harm to anyone. But when we kill or harm it, tragedy would come our way. Killing snakes was highly prohibited unless it was accidental, and if so, one would be asked to dig a small hole and bury it with dignity. This didn't attract perceived misfortunes, and more so if other relevant rituals follow in case of a totemic reptile.<sup>38</sup>

The discussion on snakes in African spirituality was wide-ranging, with almost every ethnic tribe represented in the FGD acknowledging spiritually significant snakes in their cultural background. One respondent from the Kikuube district spoke of a giant snake on Lake Albert, which was believed to offer blessings to fishermen,<sup>39</sup> while Lacor, a respondent from Kitgum informed me of a giant mystical snake at River Nile Bridge (in Karuma).<sup>40</sup> A study on snakes in African traditions has been conducted by Robert Hazel, which supplements these accounts.<sup>41</sup> In some myths, snakes are said to be born of humans, and even to marry women,<sup>42</sup> which is even attested in some local media reports.<sup>43</sup> Snakes are a means to gain hidden knowledge and are used in divination practices.<sup>44</sup> Of significant interest, too, are those respondents who regarded snakes not as sacred but as satanic, as creatures that have to be killed on sight. This idea was traced to Gen. 3.14-15 (alongside Rev. 12.9 and 20.2), where God condemns the serpent. This group dismissed any positive contributions of snakes in either African antecedents or Bible traditions.

Another element in the study was water. Bodies of water are widely considered to have mystical properties and are revered as homes to spirits and gods. For instance, Lake Victoria locally called *Nalubale*, and the

38. Rose Nairuba, in an interview with me (2022).

39. Byaruhanga, in an interview with me (2022).

40. Lacor, in an interview with me (2022).

41. Robert Hazel, *Snakes, People and Spirits (volume one): Traditional Eastern Africa in Its Broader Context* (London: Cambridge scholars' publishing, 2019).

42. Evelyn Namazzi, in an interview with me (2022).

43. Annet Kasiima, 'Woman claims she gave birth to a snake' (*The Standard Media*, 2017).

44. Grace Nakato, 'Ugandan witchdoctors' obsession with snakes' (*The Standard Media*, 2015).



River Nile, are home to many gods (*balubale*), while Lake Albert and River Masika are considered religious sites in Bunyoro (Western Uganda). Other Ugandan sacred bodies of water include *Kitagata*, hot springs in the Sheema District, Lakes Edward and George, among others. The Basoga people who neighbour Lake Victoria and the River Nile have the same name for both water and rain (*amadhi*), and to them waters are controlled by spiritual forces. Notably, waters evoked ambiguities, being regarded as by turns benevolent and malevolent, gentle and ferocious, natural and divine. These ambiguities served to heighten the reverence and mystery accorded to divine forces associated with water.<sup>45</sup>

The symbiotic relationships between human, natural, and divine worlds emerged repeatedly in my investigation. For instance, some respondents disclosed the belief that some element of nature was born from, or espoused to, humans, which in turn evoked a sense of awe and responsibility towards nature. For instance, there arose in discussion a claim that a python had been born to a woman in Uganda, and that the River Ssezibwa was birthed by a female deity. Birthing confers human qualities to both the female deity and the python in these examples, linking human, animal and non-animate natural with divine spheres. Nature is drawn closer to humanity in a spiritual relationship. In this way, River Ssezibwa is believed to hold divine powers that help in the safe delivery of babies where a mother takes long in labour. According to Susan Namuddu of the Kayunga District,

when a woman is pregnant and delays to give birth, she would be taken to the source of the river point where the mother of Ssezibwa is said to have knelt while giving birth to the river, and the expectant woman would kneel in the same place and she would give birth. The river can also cure sickness. People seeking healing can bathe at the source of the river while uttering prayers. It also averts curses and opens blessings. Visitors to Ssezibwa are required to go with dry coffee beans.<sup>46</sup>

The use of coffee beans in this ritual is interesting. Coffee beans in some Ugandan tribes are used in rituals of friendship (e.g., in blood brotherhood pacts among the Batoro and Banyoro)<sup>47</sup> and reconciliation rituals. Vincent Nyanzi, who serves as lecturer of African history in Kyambogo University, informed me that among the Baganda people coffee beans are a gateway for gaining admission to the spiritual realm, a sign of respect that maintains the spiritual equilibrium and persuades benevolent deities to yield blessings.

45. For a fuller discussion, see Michael G. Kenny, 'The Powers of Lake Victoria', *Anthropos* 5.6 (1977), pp. 720 and 721.

46. Susan Namuddu, in an interview with me (2022).

47. See, Luise White, 'Blood Brotherhood Revisited: Kinship, Relationship, and the Body in East and Central Africa', *Journal of the International African Institute* 64.3 (1994), pp. 359 and 364; Stephen Atuhaire, in an interview with me (2022).

Coffee beans can be chewed or offered up at a religious site. They signify true allegiance with spiritual authority.<sup>48</sup>

Having illustrated more fully some of the knowledge of African traditional beliefs among my respondents, let me turn again to Genesis 2–3, which, as already demonstrated, offers scope for affinity with African conceptualisation of the divine.

### *Reading Genesis 2–3 in and for Uganda*

How can Genesis 2–3 be read within a Ugandan spiritual context? Which theological ideas can be directed towards environmental protection? First of all, compatible with responses from Ugandan participants in my study, Genesis 2–3 reflects awareness of spiritual power in nature. Hence, the garden of Eden contains extraordinary trees associated with life, and knowledge of good and evil. These trees are sacred, and associated with taboos preventing eating from or even touching them (Gen. 2.17; 3.3). This corresponds with, or sits comfortably alongside, Ugandan and other African cosmologies, where sacred trees (like *Nakayima*, *Nabukalu*, and *Saka*) and forests abound. Both Edenic and Ugandan sacred gardens or forests have suffered on account of human greed. They have been eaten and destroyed by fire, and by machines, to satisfy human greed for money or modernisation. This has exposed the nakedness of nature and the shame of human perpetrators.

We see in Genesis 2–3 a snake that can reveal mysteries of nature (and God) and that lives in the sacred trees. In many African traditions, the human relationship with snakes is ambiguous. On the one hand, snakes are revered as epitomes of the spirit world, and on the other feared for their venom. Genesis 3 adds a new dimension to this by portraying the snake as a clever tempter and the cause of human suffering. In Afro-Christian contexts, snakes are sometimes demonised and killed. This article calls for more nuance, and for regarding snakes in terms of biodiversity and ecological systems.<sup>49</sup> It helps here to draw on the aforementioned dual Hebrew meaning of שָׂרִפָּ as both creature of nature and in relationship with the sacred world.

In Eden water is mysterious. It is a life force, without which nature as we know it cannot survive. It is by water that nature developed towards humanity, and humanity towards civilisation. Eden, consequently, was at the centre of rivers and Mesopotamia (literally, ‘between the rivers’) like other civilisations, was centred on bodies of water. But water is also destructive. In the

48. Vincent Nyanzi, interview with me (2022).

49. Juan-Jacques Forgas, ‘Functional importance of snakes in a strandveld ecosystem’ (MSc. diss., University of the Western Cape, 2018). See also, Stephen J. Mullin and Richard E. Seigel, *Snakes: Ecology and Conservation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

Ugandan context, water is revered and conceptualised in spiritual terms as an embodiment of deities like *Mukasa*. Water is mysterious, and can bless or kill people. This perception informs the cultic and respectful relationship many Ugandans have with water. Again, attitudes to and associations with water reflected in both Genesis and Ugandan spirituality can be harnessed towards conservation efforts, to promote a theology of ecology that respects, protects and cherishes bodies of waters.

An Afro-biblical hermeneutics of Genesis 2–3 elevates African consciousness alongside biblical scholarship and challenges worldviews that objectify or commodify nature in capitalistic and consumerist terms, advocating instead for an ethic that treats nature as divine and in symbiotic relationship with humanity. It is a spirituality that reawakens human consciousness to rules, roles and responsibilities and that will draw nature closer to humanity. This might override the prevailing hierarchical consciousness, which has grown from the weak grafting that rendered African epistemological worldviews inferior to missionary Christian worldviews, with devastating consequences.

Damaging and harmful actions like deforestation, pollution and destruction of biodiversity, have uncovered nature's nakedness and humanity's shame.<sup>50</sup> Order has been disrupted and cries out to be restored. The female body and its power to give birth and nurture are widely associated with nature (land, water and their fertility) and with mysterious power, including death. Again, this applies to the Bible (e.g., Job 1.21) and certain African beliefs. Hence, in many sub-Saharan African communities, including in Ugandan ones, a mother's private parts are sacred and her nakedness taboo, not to be spoken of, or looked upon. It is believed that exposing or sighting one's mother's private parts can bring curses. Related to the power of maternal potency, in many African traditions, the placenta and umbilical cord are treated with special care because they are believed to hold potential to either harm a baby or to enable others to ritually manipulate it in malevolent or benevolent ways. Once more, the relationship between the maternal body and nature, shared by the Bible and African beliefs, evokes respect and sense of sanctity for nature. Again, this can be harnessed to condemn abuse of nature, which is as abhorrent as abuse of one's mother.

Edenic disobedience is associated with eating and subsequent punishment. The act of eating can be associated with self-indulgence, consumerism, and individualistic desires and tastes. Retributive punishment is significant in the Bible and in African spirituality where sin against the divine and nature is also punished ferociously.<sup>51</sup> Contemporary calamities

50. See Christoph Berner *et al.* (eds.) *Clothing and Nudity in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

51. See Daniel Kasomo, 'An investigation of Sin and Evil in African cosmology', *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 1.8 (2009), pp. 145-55.

associated with climate change call for a theology that challenges destructive practices and ideologies. A theology of responsibility is needed. To facilitate this, I am recommending that the Bible is read through African lenses that conceptualise nature as divine. My example of focus has shown how Genesis 2–3 offers considerable scope for such a reading, given that it is compatible with a reading that confers sanctity on natural phenomena, such as bodies of water, trees and snakes.

As discussed above, many Ugandans focus disproportionately on sin as constituting primarily sexual immorality. Hence, the reason why Lake Albert is shrinking is attributed to people having sex near the sacred sites and some respondents pointed to the cause of the Mbale floods as being rampant prostitution in the city. This chapter emphasises sin in a context of ecology, arguing that protection of nature is a collective responsibility, and one more pressing than over-emphasis on individuals' sexual conduct.

This chapter does not reject scientific solutions but advocates for such solutions operating within a theological framework, which draws on Afro-biblical ideas.<sup>52</sup> This, I argue, is best suited for mobilising a religious population, such as that of Uganda. Africanisation of the Bible should not be limited to language or translation but would do well to include other theological conceptions that nourish healing theologies, particularly when these can be harnessed towards addressing climate change and environmental destruction. This will follow in the footsteps of Wangari Muta Maathai who challenged gender and political stereotypes to campaign for and create the greenbelt in Kenya.

### *Conclusion*

Climate change, environmental destruction and rapid extinction of species are Uganda's most concerning and large-scale challenges of our time. Such challenges require urgent and massive engagement on every front. Towards this endeavour, there is value in harnessing Afro-biblical spirituality, to complement and propel forwards scientific solutions. Earlier interpretations of Genesis 2–3, including those fuelling missionary and colonial activities, promoted a model of human dominion over and exploitation of the natural world. This also served to alienate the spirituality of nature, which is central to traditional African religions and cosmologies of Uganda. Moreover, African spiritualities were being denigrated as part of the colonial and missionary advance. They did not, however, disappear but have continued to inform and infuse African religious consciousness, including in Uganda.

52. Science and theology can work together. See, for instance, Michele Francis, "'Sacred forests" in West Africa capture carbon and keep soil healthy' (*The Conversation*, 2021).

In my investigation into Afro-biblical reading of Genesis 2–3, respondents affirmed the divinity of nature, but this was not always integrated with the Genesis narratives. Instead, they often kept ‘Bible’ and ‘African beliefs’ separate. As Akoto-Abutiata would probably say, there is need to graft an African hermeneutic with the Bible more firmly, so as to produce a theology of responsibility. I have shown that the potential for this is indeed there, given the many affinities between Genesis 2–3 and Ugandan spiritual beliefs.

In terms of activism, I have foregrounded data gathered from academics and ordinary readers in Uganda. Such data too rarely receives a forum, in Uganda itself, but even more so, internationally, in biblical studies conferences, publications, or classrooms. Moreover, for other kinds of activism to be effective—notably, activism on behalf of environmental protection in Uganda—religion and spiritual sensibilities, so integral to the vast majority of the nation’s population, are essential. This chapter has strived for inclusion and promotion of Ugandan Afro-biblical perspectives and for applying these towards healing Uganda’s natural world.

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