



Ecological Crisis, Gender and Liberation: Reading Ancient Narratives of Disaster in the Age of Climate Displacement

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Abstract

Christian ecological ethics has settled on stewardship as its governing idiom. This article argues that the settlement is not innocent. Stewardship became dominant because it is the one available vocabulary that asks nothing of existing property relations: it regulates how owners behave without asking how they came to own. Set against that idiom, the Hebrew Bible's narratives of disaster tell a different story. The Flood, the Egyptian famine and Joseph's grain administration, the drought of the Elijah cycle, the locust devastation of Joel, and the Babylonian deportations are narratives about who absorbs loss, who administers scarcity, and who is moved. That is also the grammar of climate displacement. Read in this register, Genesis 41-47 is a cautionary text rather than a model, since Joseph's celebrated food-security policy concludes with the land of Egypt consolidated under the crown and its cultivators reduced to tenancy. The article develops three commitments the stewardship literature has largely left aside. First, it reads the disaster narratives as accounts of distributed loss. Second, it takes gender as constitutive rather than incidental, drawing on ecofeminist and African women's biblical interpretation, on the ambivalence of the land-as-female trope in prophetic rhetoric, and on evidence that female-headed rural households lose approximately 8 per cent more income to heat stress than male-headed households in comparable settings. Third, it reads land through liberation theology rather than managerial ethics, treating Jubilee as redistribution and the preferential option for the poor as a hermeneutical starting point for adaptation policy. The existing evidence on faith-based resilience is retained but reoriented toward mobility: slow-onset displacement, planned relocation, and the fact that people displaced by climatic change fall outside the 1951 Refugee Convention definition. Counter-arguments receive sustained attention, including the charge of anachronism and the likelihood that the Jubilee was never implemented.

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1. Introduction

1.1. A Crisis of Distribution, Not Only of Damage

Two claims sit awkwardly together in contemporary Christian environmental ethics. The first is that creation belongs to God and that human authority over it is delegated, bounded and accountable. The second is that this delegation can be discharged without disturbing who currently holds title to land, water and the mineral wealth beneath them. The first claim is theologically serious and widely defended ^[69, 31]. The second is rarely stated outright, yet it governs the practical shape of most stewardship discourse. This article treats the gap between them as the problem worth addressing.

The argument advanced here is that stewardship became the dominant Christian ecological idiom precisely because it is the one that asks nothing of property. A steward manages what someone else owns. The metaphor regulates conduct and leaves entitlement untouched, which is why it travels so easily across otherwise hostile theological and political constituencies. Read against that idiom, the Hebrew Bible's narratives of ecological catastrophe support something more demanding: a redistributive and gender-attentive ethic built around the question of who bears loss when the rains fail.

Lynn White's charge that Christian dominion helped licence the exploitation of nature set the terms of debate for two generations and has been answered many times over^[13]. The answers have largely been hermeneutical, distinguishing domination from representative rule and situating the Genesis mandate within a wider creation theology^[46, 98]. What the answers have rarely done is ask a materially different question. Suppose the interpretive dispute over Genesis 1:28 were settled tomorrow in favour of accountable rule. Whose fields would change hands? On the evidence of the stewardship literature, none.

That silence matters now more than it did in 1967. Climate change does not distribute its harms evenly across a population of undifferentiated stewards. It concentrates them, following existing fault lines of tenure, gender, income and citizenship, and it moves people. At the end of 2024 some 83.4 million people were living in internal displacement worldwide, with storms alone triggering 25.2 million new displacements during that year and floods a further 19.1 million; twenty-nine countries recorded their highest disaster displacement figures on record^[50]. These are not accidents of weather. They are outcomes of who lives where, on what terms, with what claim to move or stay.

1.2. Land Degradation and the Unequal Distribution of Exposure

Degradation and climatic stress reinforce one another, and the resulting damage tracks social position rather than rainfall alone. Climate-driven degradation generates effects that run well past declining yields into livelihood insecurity, migration pressure and health risk^[112]. Remote-sensing work in the Nigerian Guinea Savannah shows human activity dominating the decline in biomass productivity between 2003 and 2018, which cautions against treating deterioration as a purely meteorological outcome^[6]. Long-term land-cover change in Ethiopia's Upper Tekeze Basin has reshaped vegetation, cultivation and settlement in ways that compromise ecosystem services and accelerate erosion^[36]. Exposure to the same hazard produces different outcomes. Evidence from semiarid India demonstrates that drought exposure among smallholders resolves into markedly unequal results depending on landholding size, cropping choice, access to liquidity and capacity to restore production^[67]. The lesson generalises. Wealth buys buffers, and the absence of buffers converts a bad season into a permanent loss.

Nor is degradation a developing-world problem. Research in the United States Pacific Northwest links erosion, organic-matter depletion and acidification to declining soil function and argues for integrating ecological resilience into soil-health management^[29]. What differs across settings is not the presence of damage but the capacity to absorb it. Across Latin America and the Caribbean, degradation and desertification are increasingly bound up with livelihood disruption and

human mobility, yet national climate and desertification policies frequently fail to register the connection^[103]. That policy blind spot is instructive. Displacement is the point at which ecological loss becomes irreversible for a household, and it is the point at which most environmental policy stops looking.

1.3. Scope, Method and the Shape of the Argument

This article is a critical integrative review drawing on biblical studies, ecofeminist and African women's theology, liberation theology, climate adaptation research, gender and development scholarship, and displacement law and policy. It does not attempt systematic coverage of any one of these fields. It attempts something harder and more useful: to put them in contact at the points where they bear on a single question.

Four commitments organise what follows. Section 2 reads five ancient narratives of disaster as accounts of distributed loss. Section 3 takes up gender in two strands, interpretive and empirical. Section 4 makes the case against stewardship as an adequate category and reconstructs the land material through liberation theology. Section 5 reorients the substantial existing evidence on faith-based resilience toward mobility and displacement. Section 6 sets out implications and research priorities.

Two disclosures about method are owed to the reader. First, the argument is evaluative. Where the evidence is thin, this article says so, and it says so most often about claims made on behalf of faith communities by their own advocates. Second, the counter-case is given full force before it is answered, particularly the charge that liberationist readings import modern politics into ancient texts, and the probability that the Jubilee was never actually practised.

2. Reading Ancient Narratives of Disaster

Biblical scholarship has begun to borrow systematically from migration and refugee studies, and the borrowing has proved productive precisely because the Hebrew Bible is saturated with movement under duress^[115]. This section pushes that development in a specific direction. It reads five disaster narratives not for what they say about the environment in general but for what they say about the social administration of scarcity.

2.1. The Flood: Catastrophe, Covenant and the Ark as Refuge

Genesis 6-9 is the canon's founding account of total ecological collapse, and it is theologically uncomfortable in ways that ecological readings should not smooth over. Ibita's analysis of the Yahwist and Priestly strands works through what she calls a modified ecological triangle, tracking relations between the divine and the human, the divine and non-human creatures, and humans and non-humans, and she declines to resolve the difficulty that the catastrophe is divinely authored and that non-human creatures perish in it without having caused it (Ibita, 2020). That refusal is the right instinct. A flood narrative in which the innocent drown alongside the guilty is a poor text for anyone seeking reassurance and a good one for anyone thinking about climate loss, where causal responsibility and exposure are almost inversely related.

Read spatially, the narrative acquires a further register. A geocritical reading of Genesis 6-9 treats the ark as simultaneously an affective space and an architecture of

protection, and traces three movements across the text: the destruction of inhabited space, confinement within a bounded refuge, and the restoration of habitable land (Binu and Kuriakose, 2026). The sequence maps with uncomfortable precision onto contemporary displacement. Homes become uninhabitable; people are gathered into enclosures that are safe and confining at once; return, where it happens at all, is to a transformed landscape.

The covenant that follows is where the text does its most distinctive work. It is made with every living creature, not with Noah's household alone, and it commits the deity rather than obliging humanity. This is worth pressing against stewardship readings. The Noachic covenant does not install a manager. It constrains the party with power. Whether a covenant that binds God can be made to bind an oil major is precisely the question the stewardship literature does not ask, and the Flood narrative's own grammar suggests that the constraint should fall where the power sits.

2.2. Famine and the Joseph Administration: The Bible's Cautionary Text on Adaptation

Genesis 41-47 contains the most detailed account of disaster governance in the Hebrew Bible, and its treatment in the faith-and-development literature is a minor scandal. Joseph interprets the dream, calculates a twenty per cent levy across seven years of abundance, builds the granaries, and feeds Egypt through seven years of famine. Development writing reliably stops there. The narrative does not. What the grain was exchanged for is set out in verses 13 to 26 of chapter 47. First the money of Egypt and Canaan, gathered into Pharaoh's house. Then the livestock. Then the land itself, purchased field by field as the famine deepened, until the text can state that the land became Pharaoh's. Then the people, who ask to be bought along with their ground and who emerge as tenants paying a fifth of the harvest in perpetuity. Cha argues that these policies were unjust, that gratitude from the Egyptians does not validate the method, and that the resulting monopoly is exactly the arrangement the Torah's land legislation was constructed to prevent^[21]. A recent analysis of the same passage reaches a convergent judgement from a different direction, reading the episode as a case of emergency used to justify institutional expansion, in which a bureaucratic system preserved lives by eliminating private landholding and converting cultivators into dependants of the state^[70].

The two readings are not identical and the difference matters. Cha's case is canonical and theological: the narrative records what Israel's own law forbids. Limbong and Panjaitan's is political-economic: crisis is the condition under which asset centralisation becomes possible and appears benevolent. Taken together they establish something that neither establishes alone. The Joseph cycle is not a story about whether a famine response worked. It worked. It is a story about what a successful famine response cost, and about who ended up holding the assets afterwards.

Adaptation policy should find this recognisable. Climate finance, resilience infrastructure and planned relocation all involve transferring resources into a crisis, and all create opportunities for the terms of transfer to be set by whoever controls the granary. The objection that this is an anachronistic reading has some force and will be answered in Section 4. For now it is enough to note that the anachronism charge is selective: the same passage is routinely mined for

lessons in strategic reserves and food-security planning by writers who do not consider that use anachronistic at all.

2.3. Drought, the Widow and the Vineyard: The Elijah Cycle

The drought announced in 1 Kings 17 lasts three years and is framed as a judgement on the house of Ahab, yet the narrative immediately moves to a household that had no part in the offence. Elijah is sent to Zarephath, outside Israel, to a widow gathering sticks for a final meal before she and her son die. Foreign, female, propertyless and about to be destroyed by a drought caused by someone else's politics, she is the disaster narrative's clearest portrait of unearned exposure. Land seizure receives its most direct treatment in the same cycle. Naboth refuses to sell his ancestral vineyard to the king; Jezebel arranges his judicial murder; Ahab takes possession. Mtshiselwa reads 1 Kings 21 alongside Xhosa oral narrative, arguing that Ahab's interest is asset accumulation while Naboth's is subsistence dependence on an inheritance, and he draws the comparison out to colonial and apartheid dispossession in South Africa^[81]. His most useful observation concerns what happens next. Jehu's revolution destroys Ahab's dynasty, but the land is not restored to Naboth's family; Jehu keeps it. A revolution betrayed, in Mtshiselwa's phrase.

That detail earns its place in a climate argument. Regime change, or in contemporary terms a change of adaptation regime, does not by itself return anything to the dispossessed. The distributional question survives the political one. Drought narratives and land-seizure narratives sit adjacent in 1 Kings for a reason: scarcity is the occasion on which holdings change hands.

2.4. Locusts: Joel and the Grammar of Agrarian Collapse

Joel opens with an agricultural catastrophe described in forensic detail, working through the grain, the vine, the fig, the pomegranate and the palm, and registering the consequences for the farmers, the vine-dressers and the priests whose offerings depend on a harvest. Western exegesis has largely allegorised the insects into invading armies. Udoekpo argues that this move is a Eurocentric habit and that reading from African agricultural contexts restores the locusts to their literal and socio-economic force, where such plagues destroy subsistence in communities already short of medicines, food supplies and health infrastructure^[117].

The methodological point is larger than the exegetical one. An interpretive tradition seated in food-secure societies converts a text about starvation into a text about geopolitics, and then teaches that conversion as scholarship. Udoekpo's reading also declines the obvious moralism: he notes that locusts are themselves a protein source with economic value when harvested, which complicates any neat equation of insect with judgement.

For the present argument Joel supplies something the other narratives do not. It shows what total agrarian failure looks like from inside a farming community, and it shows a religious institution whose own economy collapses with the harvest. Congregations in climate-exposed agricultural regions are not external observers of crop failure. Their offerings, their buildings and their clergy salaries are downstream of the same rainfall.

2.5. Exile as Mass Displacement

The Babylonian deportations are the Hebrew Bible's central experience of forced movement, and they produced a literature of land loss with few parallels in the ancient world. Lamentations personifies a ruined city as a bereaved and violated woman. Psalm 137 records the refusal to perform cultural memory on demand in a foreign territory: the harps hung on the willows, the question of how to sing in a strange land, and then the psalm's closing violence, which liturgical use has generally preferred to omit.

Ku's reading of Lamentations develops the concept of a fourth-person lament, a mode of address

relayed across the boundary of death, mediated through remaining bodies and ruined spaces, which keeps the dead publicly addressable when authorities would prefer them forgotten^[66]. She reads it as resistant passage within enforced immobility. The framing is precise and useful, because climate displacement produces exactly this condition: people who cannot stay and cannot legally go, whose losses are registered nowhere in the international protection architecture.

Ecological readings of Jeremiah reinforce the connection. Land in the prophetic corpus is not scenery behind political history; it mourns, suffers pollution and registers the disorder of the community that works it, so that covenant, judgement, displacement and restoration are all read through it^[26]. Exile in this literature is a land event and a body event at once.

What the five narratives share is a structure rather than a theme. In each, an ecological shock arrives; the loss is then distributed by institutions; and the distribution follows prior inequality. The Flood spares the household with the boat. The famine transfers Egypt's land to the crown. The drought reaches a foreign widow before it reaches the palace. The locusts take the smallholder's fig tree. The deportations remove a population and redistribute its fields. This is not a devotional reading and it is not intended as one. It is the observation that ancient disaster literature was already interested in the question that climate displacement now forces, and that stewardship discourse, by confining itself to how well individuals manage what they hold, has no apparatus for asking it.

3. Gender, Land and Ecological Harm

The title of this article names gender second, and the reasons are both interpretive and empirical. Reading the disaster narratives without attention to gender produces a truncated account of who bears loss, and reading the climate evidence without it produces a truncated account of who is exposed.

3.1. The Interpretive Strand: Ecofeminist and African Women's Readings

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has been the most consequential collective project in African biblical interpretation over the past three decades.

Togarasei's assessment, written from outside the Circle by a male African biblical scholar, credits its members with developing interpretive methods answerable to African women's lived circumstances and with functioning as engaged scholars serving intellectual and social ends at once, while noting that gaps remain in the programme^[114]. The Circle's relevance here is direct: its characteristic move is to read biblical texts from the position of those whose survival is at stake in them, which is also what a displacement-attentive reading requires.

That method produces distinctive results on ecological texts. Juma's Afro-ecofeminist reading of Genesis 2:4-17 presses the wordplay between adam and adamah into an argument for reciprocal dependence rather than hierarchy, links ecological degradation to women's subordination as products of the same structures, and points to African women's roles as custodians of indigenous ecological knowledge, from sacred grove preservation to traditional forecasting^[57]. Hearn-Ayodele, Rhedrick and Lowe extend the analysis to the shared ideological roots of ecological destruction and gender-based violence, arguing that patriarchal readings of Genesis have sanctioned the exploitation of natural resources and of women through a single logic of domination^[43].

Here the counter-argument deserves a hearing rather than a dismissal. The identification of woman with earth is not obviously a resource for women. It is the same identification that prophetic rhetoric uses to devastating effect. Brenner's analysis of what she termed the pornoprophetic in Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel shows how the figure of God as wronged husband and Israel as unfaithful wife deploys exposure, violence and punishment to legitimate divine retribution, weaponising female sexuality as a rhetorical instrument^[17].

Tuasela, Apituley and Hukubun, rereading Hosea 2 from Maluku, reach a convergent judgement: the woman's body in the text is politicised as minor, silent, objectified and sinful, and the gendered pairing of divine masculinity with a feminised Israel reinforces androcentric power^[116].

So the land-as-female trope cuts in two directions, and any ecofeminist theology that celebrates the identification without registering its rhetorical history is doing careless work. The resolution is not to abandon the trope but to notice what it reveals. In these texts the violated land and the violated woman are figured together because both are treated as property whose worth lies in fertility and whose punishment is exposure. That is a claim about ownership, and it is the reason the gender strand and the liberation strand of this article belong in the same argument rather than in adjacent ones.

3.2. Women Inside the Disaster Narratives

Ruth is the strongest single case, because famine, migration, gleaning rights and land redemption all occur within four chapters. Elimelech's household leaves Bethlehem for Moab because of famine; the men die; Naomi returns destitute with a foreign daughter-in-law; Ruth survives by gleaning at the field margins under provisions designed for the poor and the resident alien; and the book closes with the redemption of Elimelech's parcel of land. Berman's comparative reading sets Ruth alongside displaced Ukrainian women and identifies the pattern that matters: in food crises women assume responsibility for household survival while retaining caregiving obligations, carrying what she calls a double burden, and their economic dependence on male landholders creates vulnerability to sexual exploitation^[10]. Masenya's reading of Ruth by single African Christian women approaches the same text for life rather than for analysis, which is a reminder that the book functions differently for those whose circumstances it describes^[76]. Odo and Uroko read Ruth 1:1-5 directly onto contemporary Nigerian migration, noting that relocation driven by hardship frequently ends badly for the migrant^[86].

Ruth's ending complicates any straightforwardly liberative use. The land is redeemed, but through the levirate

obligations of a male kinsman, and Ruth's security is finally secured by marriage. The book solves a displaced woman's problem by restoring her to a household, which is a solution the text's own society made available and which contemporary readers should not mistake for a general model. What Ruth does establish is that gleaning provisions were the ancient Near Eastern equivalent of a residual entitlement to food from land one does not own, and that such entitlements are what stand between a famine migrant and destitution. The widow of Zarephath and Daughter Zion complete the picture. The first is sustained by a prophet's intervention rather than by any institutional provision. The second is a city figured as a woman whose suffering is narrated at length and whose consent is never at issue.

3.3. The Empirical Strand: Exposure, Tenure, Labour and Mobility

The empirical literature on gender and climate is now large enough to sustain firm statements, and the firmest are about income. FAO's analysis of socioeconomic data from more than 100,000 rural households across twenty-four low- and middle-income countries, representing over 950 million people, found that female-headed households lose approximately 8 per cent more of their income to heat stress and 3 per cent more to floods than male-headed households, equivalent to per capita losses of around 83 US dollars and 35 US dollars respectively, and scaling to roughly 37 billion and 16 billion US dollars across the countries studied^[35]. The same analysis estimates that a 1 degree Celsius rise in temperature is associated with women experiencing a 34 per cent greater loss in total income than men.

Those gaps have structural sources rather than behavioural ones. FAO's assessment of agrifood systems estimates that closing the gender gap in farm productivity and the wage gap in agricultural employment would raise global gross domestic product by nearly one trillion US dollars and reduce the number of food-insecure people by 45 million^[34]. A figure of that size is not produced by individual choices. It is produced by systematically unequal access to land, credit, inputs and extension.

Tenure is the mechanism that recurs. Kolapo and Alabuja's scoping review of twenty-three studies of gender-responsive climate-smart agriculture across sub-Saharan Africa identifies land tenure insecurity as a primary barrier, since limited property rights discourage investment in practices whose returns accrue over years, and notes that women's participation in adaptation programmes concentrates in implementation rather than in strategic decision-making^[64]. This matches the earlier finding from Ghana's Ejura Sekyedumase and Bongo districts that women and migrant farmers face tenure arrangements restricting adaptive options and weakening incentives for sustainable land management^[8], and it matches Nigerian evidence that tenure type and perceived security shape smallholders' willingness to adopt resilient practices^[60]. Three studies, three countries, one finding: adaptation behaviour follows security of tenure, and women hold less of it.

Unpaid labour is the second mechanism. Carr and colleagues, modelling water collection across regions where the global average collection time between 1990 and 2019 was roughly 23 minutes daily, found that each 1 degree Celsius of warming was associated with about four additional minutes of daily collection time, and project that under high-emissions pathways global collection times could rise by

around 30 per cent by 2050, with some regions approaching a doubling^[18]. That burden falls overwhelmingly on women and girls, and it converts warming directly into lost hours of schooling and income.

The third mechanism is protection. Van Daalen and colleagues' mixed-methods systematic review of forty-one studies found that most reported increases in one or more forms of gender-based violence during or after storms, floods, droughts, heatwaves and wildfires, mediated by economic instability, food insecurity, psychological stress and damaged infrastructure, with documented forms including sexual violence, physical assault, early and forced marriage, and witch killing^[118]. The authors are candid that most quantitative studies in their sample had methodological weaknesses and that only one included sexual and gender minorities. That candour should be carried forward rather than edited out: the direction of the association is well supported, the magnitude is not.

Policy has been slow to absorb any of this. Serraglio and Thornton's review of national frameworks in Ethiopia, India and Peru found that although roughly 22 per cent of 1,348 instruments reviewed globally incorporate gender considerations, provisions typically operate as guiding principles rather than as tailored actions addressing women's circumstances in climate-related mobility^[102]. Ethiopia integrates gender well into climate frameworks and not at all into mobility legislation. India integrates it across both with budgeting attached. Peru commits in principle and connects little in practice. The variation is itself the finding, and it indicates that gender-blind climate mobility policy is a default rather than a considered position.

Two cautions close this section. First, women are not uniformly the most exposed group, and a framing built around the category can obscure intersecting disadvantages of age, class, disability and citizenship, which is a reason to treat gender as one axis of exposure rather than as the axis. Second, women's agency is routinely underdescribed. African ecofeminist analysis argues that religious traditions can function as transformative resources for food security and gender justice rather than as obstacles, provided women's knowledge systems are treated as knowledge^[104]. The community land trust at Kipuka Kuleana in Hawai'i, led by Native Hawaiian women, links ancestral land protection to place-based education and climate adaptation, and demonstrates what women-led tenure security produces when it exists^[9].

The payoff of this section is a claim about method. Gender is not an additional variable to be controlled for in climate research. It is one of the principal mechanisms by which ecological shocks are converted into permanent loss, operating through tenure, labour time and physical safety. A theology of land that has nothing to say about who inherits has nothing to say about the majority of the people its ethics claims to serve.

4. From Stewardship to Liberation

4.1. The Critique: A Managerial Category That Leaves Ownership Unquestioned

The case for stewardship is genuine and should be stated at its strongest. Read theocentrically, human authority within creation is derivative, accountable and bounded by the Creator's purposes, which makes stewardship a vocation of protection and restraint rather than a licence for extraction^[69]. It grounds duties of preservation and restoration in God's

relation to what God has made, so that human agency carries obligations toward creatures, ecosystems and future generations^[31]. It has demonstrable behavioural traction: evidence from Hong Kong indicates that a stewardship worldview alongside commitments to justice and love strengthens willingness to protect the environment, with church education mediating the translation into consistent behaviour^[45]. Protestant scholarship has worked to make loving dominion environmentally credible by joining biblical authority to care and to recognition of the integrity of non-human creation^[90]. African ecotheology has reimagined the *imago Dei* as a calling to care that locates humanity within an interdependent community of creation^[47]. Evangelical ecotheology has closed off the eschatological escape route by arguing that continuity between creation and renewed creation makes care for nature integral to Christian hope rather than secondary to it^[52]. Religious traditions supply moral vocabularies and institutions capable of converting concern into sustained practice^[44, 53], and formation through preaching, education and congregational life is what turns doctrine into habit^[22]. Contextual readings extend the reach: South African ecological theology framed through the interconnection of humanity, God and creation^[93], and Nigerian interpretation of Genesis 2:15 connecting the commands to cultivate and to keep with environmental sanitation^[88].

That is a substantial body of work, and none of it is refuted here. The objection is narrower and, precisely because it is narrower, harder to deflect.

Stewardship is a category drawn from estate management. A steward administers property on behalf of an owner. Transposed into theology, the owner is God and the estate is creation, which yields accountability without redistribution, because the question a steward is never asked is how the estate came to be configured as it is. Village's assessment from British rural theology questions whether the metaphor is sufficient for contemporary ecological crisis and presses for examination of how stewardship is actually translated into Christian practice^[120]. Simmons offers the most serious defence available, identifying two waves of criticism, one charging stewardship with anthropocentrism and one challenging its method, and proposing a hierarchical non-anthropocentrism that preserves human priority while acknowledging wider ecological value^[105].

Simmons's rehabilitation is careful and, on its own terms, largely successful. It is also beside the point being made here. The critique Simmons answers is about where humans stand in relation to other creatures. The critique advanced in this article is about where land stands in relation to capital. A hierarchical non-anthropocentrism that prioritises human interests can be held consistently by a landowner and a landless labourer alike, and it gives neither any reason to think their respective positions should change. Adjusting the vertical axis between humans and non-humans leaves the horizontal axis between humans untouched, and it is the horizontal axis along which climate loss is distributed.

Context sharpens this. In Nigeria, divergent Christian spiritualities produce markedly different relationships to sacred landscapes and forests, with some interpretations reinforcing continuity with indigenous ecological restraint and others weakening it, which shows that Christian environmental ethics are mediated through culture rather than

deduced from doctrine^[4]. Where doctrine does not determine practice, the decisive variable is usually the material interest of those doing the interpreting.

4.2. Jubilee as Redistribution Rather Than Metaphor

Leviticus 25 is the point at which biblical land law becomes economically specific, and it is routinely defused by being read as a symbol. The text is not symbolic. It prohibits the permanent sale of land, mandates the return of ancestral holdings in the fiftieth year, releases debt-bonded Israelites, and grounds the whole arrangement in the declaration that the land is God's and its occupants are resident aliens and tenants upon it. Read through integral ecology, the passage binds environmental renewal to social justice by restraining extraction while protecting those whose livelihoods depend on access to land^[40]. Rogers reads the sabbatical rhythm as an interruption of continuous production that incorporates land and non-human creatures into covenantal rest^[97]. Sucipto's synthesis with the Indonesian Ma'pebulam tradition draws out the restorative logic of periodic relief from intensive use^[111].

The honest objection is historical, and it is strong. There is no reliable evidence that the Jubilee was ever implemented. Simon Joseph notes that observance was discontinued in the post-exilic period, that debt remission may have occurred intermittently during the Second Temple period, and that the *prosbol* mechanism appears to have circumvented it, with scholarly disagreement over whether the *prosbol* reflected genuine practice or legal fiction^[56]. A law that was never executed is a poor precedent for policy. Three responses, in ascending order of force. First, the concession must be made plainly: the Jubilee cannot be cited as evidence that periodic land redistribution has been successfully implemented, and anyone who cites it that way is overstating. Second, an unenforced law that survives canonisation is nonetheless evidence of what a tradition considered a defensible distribution of land, and its preservation alongside the narratives of dispossession examined above suggests the tradition knew the gap between its ideal and its practice. Third, the objection proves more than its users intend. If unimplemented biblical legislation cannot ground contemporary ethics, then neither can most of the Deuteronomic environmental law on which stewardship ethics routinely draws^[94]. The selectivity is revealing: the commands that constrain conduct are treated as binding, and the commands that redistribute assets are treated as poetry. Applied contextually, Jubilee has been read as a framework for repairing damaged relationships among people, land and inherited structures of power, with eco-relationality showing that ecological restoration cannot be separated from land justice in landscapes shaped by colonial and apartheid dispossession^[59]. Nigerian reflection develops it as a challenge to poverty and accumulation, linking debt release and equitable opportunity to ecological concern^[51]. Both readings take the redistributive content literally, and both are stronger for it.

4.3. Liberation Theology, Soil and Debt

Liberation theology's contribution here is methodological before it is substantive. Gutierrez's insistence that theology begins from the situation of the poor rather than arriving at them as an application reverses the usual order of operations

[41]. Boff extended that reversal to ecology, arguing that the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are one cry heard from two directions [14]. Castillo's analysis of *Laudato Si'* shows integral ecology operating at the sociopolitical, cultural-psychological and theological levels that structured Gutierrez's integral liberation, and warns specifically against conflating integral ecology with sustainable development, which has been absorbed by global capitalism to legitimate continued growth [20]. That warning applies with equal force to stewardship, which is the ecclesial equivalent of the same manoeuvre.

Latin American Christian ecological thought has long joined care for ecosystems to concern for communities facing dispossession [71], and *Laudato Si'* widened religious responsibility from private virtue toward institutional and political engagement [91]. African liberation theology sharpens the land question further. Jentile reframes post-apartheid land conflict as a theological crisis and, drawing on Biko, treats land as sacred inheritance and communal memory rather than as commodity, so that restitution becomes the recovery of testimony as well as of property [54]. Mlambo's account of the Church Land Programme documents an organisation shifting from mediating between government and churches to active solidarity with people in struggles they define themselves, and draws from that shift a methodological lesson about centring narratives from below [80].

Read from this position, the existing agrarian material changes function. Davis's agrarian reading discloses an ethic in which food production, land tenure, community wellbeing and fidelity to God are inseparable [30], and the inseparability of tenure from the rest is the operative point. Deuteronomic environmental law constrains agricultural practice through provisions on gleaning, sabbatical rest, trees and the poor [94]. Nigerian scholarship comparing Old Testament and African concepts of land emphasises entrustment for responsible use rather than exploitation [74], and soil theology reconnects worship and embodiment to the material earth [16]. Protestant agrarians in the United States treated soil conservation as religious duty and used church networks to reach farmers [72]. The agronomic evidence is likewise available for reframing. Climate-smart agriculture in southeast Nigeria encompasses production adjustment, diversification and financial strategies, with adoption conditioned by credit, extension, land and water access [87]. In South Africa, adoption of climate-smart practices was positively associated with household food security, with farm and non-farm income shaping outcomes [2]. Agroecological practices, particularly diversification, intercropping and agroforestry, frequently improve food-security and nutrition outcomes when combined [12], and the Cuban family-farm transition documents improvements in food availability, soil quality and household economic conditions after adjustment costs [73]. Organic systems may yield less than conventional ones while delivering superior soil quality and biodiversity outcomes, which is a reason to stop evaluating food security through short-term yield alone [92]. Farming God's Way frames reduced tillage and mulch retention through biblical metaphor, and Kenyan evidence suggests it can link soil care to religious identity while contributing to moisture conservation, though its agronomic claims warrant evaluation rather than endorsement [109]. Indonesian

theological reflection connects Israel's agrarian traditions to church engagement with land management and food security [58].

Notice what every one of those studies has in common. Adoption is conditioned by credit, land access and tenure security. The agronomy is not the constraint. The property arrangements are. Collective tenure demonstrates the alternative: the Cano Martin Pena Community Land Trust in Puerto Rico protects low-income residents from market-driven displacement while supporting environmental management, functioning as social protection and climate adaptation simultaneously [119]. Indigenous land restitution across Latin America exposes the limits of climate responses built on financial compensation, since loss of territory entails losses that money does not replace [27].

The analytical payoff is this. Stewardship and liberation are not two emphases within a shared framework that a synthesis could reconcile. They answer different questions. Stewardship answers how an owner should behave. Liberation answers who should own. Climate adaptation is overwhelmingly a question of the second kind, and a tradition that has spent fifty years perfecting its answer to the first has been preparing for the wrong examination.

5. Climate Displacement in the Age of Mobility

5.1. The Empirical Picture and the Protection Gap

Displacement is the outcome this article has been building toward, and the legal position must be stated accurately because it is routinely misstated. People displaced by climatic change generally fall outside the 1951 Refugee Convention. The Convention protects those with a well-founded fear of persecution on grounds of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group; environmental hazards lack the element of human agency that persecution requires and affect populations broadly rather than identifiable groups [65]. The term climate refugee is therefore a description of a predicament, not a legal status, and using it as though it were a status misleads the people it purports to help.

The jurisprudence has moved, though less than advocacy suggests. Ioane Teitiota's claim, rejected by New Zealand's courts on the reasoning above, produced a 2020 view from the UN Human Rights Committee indicating that states may hold non-refoulement obligations under human rights law where climate impacts threaten the right to life [65]. That opens a pathway outside refugee law rather than inside it, and it has not yet generated a body of successful claims. McAdam's account of the Nansen Initiative and its successor, the Platform on Disaster Displacement, documents the alternative route: 109 states endorsed an Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change in October 2015, and human mobility was incorporated into the Sendai Framework and the 2015 Paris outcome, yet the resulting instruments are soft law offering policy options rather than entitlements [77]. Most climate-related movement is in any case internal, which makes the cross-border debate somewhat disproportionate to the phenomenon. Of the 83.4 million people internally displaced at the end of 2024, disaster displacement during that year reached nearly double the decade average, with twenty-nine countries and territories recording their highest figures on record and 117 countries and territories affected by

internal displacement overall ^[50].

Two complications deserve emphasis. The first is slow onset. Sudden hazards generate visible displacement that statistical systems capture; salinisation, aridification and coastal erosion generate departures that register as economic migration, and they are undercounted accordingly. The second is immobility. A substantial portion of the most exposed population does not move, because moving requires resources that severe exposure has already consumed, and policy frameworks designed around movement have little to offer people who cannot undertake it. Planned relocation is the instrument states reach for, and the evidence on it is sobering. Ferris and Weerasinghe argue that relocation can safeguard human security when it is preceded by careful advance planning, legal and institutional frameworks, adequate financing and, above all, decision-making by affected people, and they urge states to build national frameworks before impacts make relocation urgent ^[37]. McMichael and colleagues' eight-year longitudinal study of Vunidogoloa in Fiji, relocated in 2014, found improved access to services alongside incomplete infrastructure, shifting governance arrangements, mixed health effects, and changing social organisation and place-based values, producing adaptation and maladaptation together; their central contribution is that relocation is an unfolding process rather than an event with a fixed outcome ^[78]. Longitudinal evidence of this kind is rare and it should chasten the confidence with which relocation is currently proposed. The United States illustrates the same dynamic under different institutional conditions. Voluntary buyouts of flood-prone property constitute a managed retreat programme operating at scale, and the equity questions it raises concern which neighbourhoods are offered buyouts, at what valuations, and what happens to renters who hold no title to sell. The Joseph narrative's warning applies with some precision: a programme that purchases land from households under duress transfers assets from the exposed to the state, and whether that transfer is protective or extractive depends on terms that the displaced rarely set.

5.2. Faith Communities as Actors in Reception and Resettlement

Religious institutions are already among the principal actors in displacement, and the research base on what they actually accomplish is thinner than their advocates claim. The evidence review conducted by Christian Aid with the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, combining desk analysis with participatory dialogue across South Asia, East Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, concludes that faith actors are frequently the first and sometimes the only responders providing material, emotional and spiritual support, and that they remain largely invisible in humanitarian frameworks; it also states plainly that significant knowledge gaps persist about their roles ^[25]. That last admission should be taken at face value. Invisibility is partly structural. Research on the response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines shows that secular assumptions within humanitarian systems create boundaries that obscure religion's importance to affected populations and limit engagement with local religious organisations ^[125]. The consequence is that faith actors are enlisted as delivery channels rather than as partners with analysis of their own.

Where congregations function as civic infrastructure, the effect is measurable. After Hurricane Katrina, the Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church in New Orleans mobilised social capital, trust and organisational networks to support recovery where governmental mechanisms had failed ^[95]. Following the Yogyakarta earthquake, religious beliefs, leaders and networks shaped how affected populations interpreted loss and accessed assistance, with supportive and exclusionary effects both in evidence ^[55]. In Bocaue, Bulacan, the Pagoda sa Wawa fluvial festival has been integrated with disaster preparedness, converting a devotional event into a platform for risk management ^[33]. Religion also shapes whether relocation is accepted at all. Research in Narikoso, Fiji, demonstrates that biblical narratives influenced community interpretations of coastal flooding and planned relocation, so that religious meaning can facilitate or obstruct adaptation decisions where scientific and theological explanations coexist ^[11]. Across the Pacific, where sea-level rise and threats to ancestral land carry spiritual as well as material consequences, theology can constrain adaptation or supply resources for transformation, and approaches integrating indigenous knowledge and relational understandings of creation tend to be locally legitimate ^[19]. Rural South African evidence points the same way: fatalistic interpretations discourage preventive action while interpretations acknowledging human agency support adaptation, which makes climate education more effective when it engages religious meaning systems rather than bypassing them ^[100]. In Zimbabwe, African Initiated Churches maintain ritual relationships with rivers that scarcity and pollution increasingly disrupt, and eco-theological adaptation there requires theological adjustment as much as technical intervention ^[75]. In southwestern Nigeria, Christian eco-theological traditions shape perceptions of urban green space and adaptation in ways that can encourage stewardship or undermine practical engagement ^[3].

For reception and resettlement specifically, congregations bring durable assets: buildings, volunteer capacity, language competence and social networks that outlast funding cycles. They also bring liabilities that the advocacy literature under-reports, including selectivity about whom they welcome and a tendency to frame reception as charity rather than as obligation. The Chesapeake Bay collaboration between rural churches and government actors is instructive on both counts, enabling knowledge exchange about coastal climate risk while encountering real friction over language, priorities and institutional expectations ^[79]. Churches function as resilience intermediaries when partnerships are sustained and organised around shared problems, and function poorly when congregational trust is treated as a resource to be extracted.

5.3. The United States and the Global South Compared

American Christian climate action is not a movement but a field, differentiated by denomination, race, region and political alignment. Evangelical creation care has framed climate responsibility through biblical stewardship and concern for vulnerable neighbours, yet the discourse has polarised alongside American partisan conflict, with moderate and progressive evangelicals giving environmental questions greater attention while conservative constituencies resist climate-centred interpretations of Christian

responsibility^[28]. Survey evidence resists the caricature: although American evangelicals have historically reported lower acceptance of anthropogenic warming than non-evangelicals, many express concern about climate impacts and support particular policies, especially where risk is understood through altruistic and biospheric values^[108].

The most consequential recent finding concerns silence rather than disbelief. Sparkman and Syropoulos surveyed 1,600 US religious leaders and found that close to 90 per cent of Christian leaders accept that humans influence climate change, 60 per cent attributing a major role and a further 30 per cent a minor one, while roughly half have never discussed it with their congregation and only about a quarter have mentioned it more than once or twice; congregants, meanwhile, estimated that around half of their leaders reject human influence, when the true figure is approximately 10 per cent^[110]. The gap is a five-fold overestimate of clerical scepticism, manufactured by silence. This reframes the American problem substantially. The constraint is not theological conviction but institutional courage, and that is a different problem with different remedies.

Catholic climate action shows a parallel implementation gap. *Laudato Si'* located climate change within a moral framework of integral ecology and responsibility for the common home, but in the United States papal authority meets a polarised environment; evidence around the encyclical indicates modest shifts in concern among parts of the public while conservative audiences processed papal messaging through existing political identities^[68]. At parish level, research among Catholic clergy in a US diocese found limited substantive engagement with environmental concerns despite formal teaching^[124]. Work with clergy in the EcoPreacher cohort finds that participants conceptualise their environmental commitments through ethical consumption, provision for future generations, justice-related action, community education and connectedness, which indicates that the vocabulary is available where the willingness exists^[101]. Religious-environmental organisations have pursued ethics-based environmentalism through education, advocacy and lifestyle change, complementing technical approaches by addressing values and obligations, while facing resource constraints, recruitment difficulties and real difficulty demonstrating outcomes^[106]. Comparative research confirms that traditions may hold substantial ecological potential alongside internal resistance and competing institutional priorities^[63].

Adaptation in developing contexts operates under different constraints and with different assets. Among smallholder maize farmers in southwest Nigeria, adoption of multiple adaptation strategies varies with education, farm size, credit access, association membership and climate information, showing adaptive capacity to be structured by socioeconomic opportunity rather than by exposure^[3]. In northern Ghana, public and civic institutions support drought adaptation through knowledge and farm-management assistance while providing weakly in finance, markets and infrastructure, so households facing identical rainfall stress experience divergent possibilities^[126]. Bangladesh's coastal zones confront cyclones, salinity and climate-related migration, drawing on scientific and indigenous knowledge that inadequate policy integration constrains^[24], while coastal communities there retain indigenous techniques in housing, agriculture and forecasting that remain valuable when combined with scientific knowledge^[7]. In Fiji, relocation and

livelihood decisions are shaped by social hierarchy, place attachment and locally negotiated risk, so that preserving cultural space is itself a dimension of resilience^[85]. Among Xo Dang communities in central Vietnam, indigenous indicators and modified planting calendars remain in use and remain underrepresented in formal policy^[48]. Decentralised community planning in northern India directs adaptation benefits toward poorer and historically marginalised groups where local democratic institutions have matured, which shows that devolution works only where local institutions enable accountable participation^[38].

The conventional comparison holds that the United States has resources and the Global South has legitimacy. It is too tidy. Even in the resource-rich setting, policy inventories reveal gaps in extreme-heat planning, human services and implementation^[113], so wealth does not produce comprehensive resilience. And Nigerian scholarship has argued that churches can contribute to mitigation and adaptation through awareness and direct care while criticising ecclesial indifference where climate disruption is treated as peripheral to mission^[84], which is a critique of Global South churches by Global South scholars and not an import. African theological reflection calls religious leaders to move past passive or exclusively spiritual responses toward mobilisation, challenge to damaging theologies and interreligious cooperation^[23]. Nigerian analysis of the barriers and bridges to church climate action identifies stewardship theology, climate literacy, communication and organisational capacity as the conditions under which belief becomes action^[82], and reflection on the church's place in mitigation and adaptation argues for integrating creation care into ministry and administration rather than treating climate as external policy^[32].

What transfers across settings is method rather than programme. Participatory decision-making strengthens collective action and mutual assistance, particularly where communities determine investments in public goods, as evidence from Senegal and Mali indicates^[89]. Social capital and perceived shared risk increased willingness to participate in adaptation projects in the Federated States of Micronesia^[42].

Comparative experience across Bangladesh, the Philippines and Vanuatu shows effective grassroots adaptation depending on local authority, institutions and locally defined measures of success, with external actors most useful when enabling rather than displacing those capacities^[122].

The comparison yields one asymmetry worth naming. American churches hold disproportionate influence over the emissions trajectory and almost none of the exposure; churches across the Global South hold the exposure and almost none of the influence. Solidarity language obscures this, and a liberationist reading should not permit the obscuring. The obligation running from the first group to the second is not partnership. It is restitution.

6. Implications, Research Priorities and Policy

6.1. What Follows for Theology and for Practice

If the argument to this point holds, several things follow for how religious institutions engage climate policy.

Theology supplies moral orientation, policy converts priorities into rules and investment, and partnership connects both to the people carrying the risk. Evidence from northern Nigeria shows Muslim and Christian leaders recognising responsibility for awareness creation and community-based

adaptation while varying considerably in willingness to press government for inclusive solutions, which demonstrates that moral authority does not convert automatically into advocacy and that faith leaders need climate literacy and institutional channels for community concerns to reach governance ^[1]. South Africa's national climate policy discourse illustrates the corresponding risk on the state side, where commitments to equity and poverty reduction can remain rhetorically present without positioning poor communities as rights-bearing participants ^[39]. Governance that treats vulnerable populations as recipients of protection weakens their agency and leaves structural inequality unaddressed, which is the procedural expression of the same failure that stewardship represents conceptually.

Within European Union climate discourse, religious organisations introduce concepts of creation, responsibility and solidarity that overlap with secular sustainability norms and create openings for coalition, while differences within and between traditions can generate conflict requiring transparent negotiation ^[61]. Religious participation is constructive where it adds moral depth without claiming exemption from evidence or democratic accountability. Organisationally, environmental engagement among religious bodies in Germany and Switzerland is shaped by institutional position and by the difference between local and supra-local scales, with denominational headquarters holding resources and visibility while congregations hold neighbourhood relationships and practical knowledge; linking the levels allows advocacy and implementation to reinforce each other ^[62]. Policy design that ignores values, worldviews and assumptions about human-nature relationships underperforms, and integrating these inner dimensions strengthens rather than replaces regulatory instruments ^[121].

Four practical implications deserve statement. Congregations holding land should treat tenure decisions as the primary site of their ecological ethics, since a church that owns agricultural land and leases it on extractive terms has settled the question its preaching leaves open. Denominations engaged in disaster response should separate reception work from evangelistic activity, because conditioning assistance corrupts both. Institutions advocating adaptation finance should press on the terms of transfer rather than the volume alone, for the reasons Genesis 47 makes plain. And theological education in climate-exposed regions should treat displacement law as a competence rather than a specialism, since clergy are among the first people a displaced household consults.

6.2. Research Priorities

The research base has characteristic weaknesses that should be named rather than managed. The causal relationship between religious belief and environmental behaviour remains poorly established: Nigerian evidence indicates that eschatological expectation, dominion beliefs and denominational difference shape climate perceptions, but small samples and geographically bounded designs limit generalisation, which argues for longitudinal, mixed-method and multi-denominational designs able to distinguish professed theology from observable practice ^[83]. Conceptual precision is equally weak. Systematic review evidence from Ghana finds inconsistent definitions, measures and explanatory models producing contradictory findings across settings, and recommends validated instruments alongside

treatment of gender, age, class and tradition as interacting variables rather than background characteristics ^[99]. That recommendation aligns directly with the argument of Section 3, and it has not been acted upon.

Collaboration between faith institutions and scientific communities is under-evaluated. Faith-based organisations hold educational networks, land and youth constituencies, yet evidence on whether partnership improves climate literacy, adaptation behaviour, institutional emissions or land management remains scarce, and future work should use measurable outcomes rather than programme descriptions ^[15]. Within Catholic scholarship the priority is implementation research examining how teaching translates into parish governance, investment, procurement, land use and advocacy across cultural settings ^[96]. Geographic and methodological breadth is a further gap: Indonesian evidence shows environmental movements combining formal religion, indigenous knowledge and local practice through context-specific religious creativity, which suggests treating lived religion and hybrid knowledge systems as the object of study rather than treating institutional religion as an isolated explanatory variable ^[107].

Three priorities specific to this article's reframing should be added. First, no dataset currently links congregational landholding to land-use outcomes at scale, which makes the central claim of Section 4 harder to test than it should be. Second, the gendered dimensions of faith-based displacement response are almost entirely undocumented, despite women constituting the majority of both congregational membership and displaced populations. Third, longitudinal evaluation of planned relocation involving faith communities is limited to a handful of Pacific cases, and the Vunidogoloa study stands nearly alone in tracking outcomes across years rather than months ^[78].

Conclusion

This article set out to test a suspicion: that stewardship has held its position in Christian ecological ethics because it is the vocabulary that leaves property relations undisturbed. The evidence assembled here supports the suspicion. Stewardship literature is extensive, theologically serious and almost entirely silent on ownership. Its most capable defenders answer the charge of anthropocentrism and pass over the charge of quietism about distribution, which is the charge that matters when ecological loss is allocated by tenure, gender and citizenship.

The ancient narratives of disaster tell against the settlement. The Flood distributes survival by access to a vessel. The Egyptian famine ends with Egypt's land under the crown and its cultivators reduced to a fifth of their harvest, which makes Genesis 41-47 a warning about adaptation governance rather than a manual for it. The drought reaches a foreign widow before it reaches the palace, and the adjacent narrative of Naboth's vineyard records both a seizure and a revolution that failed to reverse it. Joel narrates agrarian collapse from inside a farming community. The deportations produced a literature of land loss whose lament is still the most accurate available description of what it is to be moved and to be unable to move.

Gender is not an addition to this account. Tenure insecurity, unpaid collection labour and heightened violence after extreme events are the mechanisms through which ecological shocks become permanent losses, and they operate along gendered lines with measurable force, including income

losses from heat stress approximately 8 per cent greater for female-headed rural households. The prophetic figuring of land as a violated woman is a reminder that the tradition has long understood land and women's bodies to be governed by the same logic of ownership, though it understood this in the register of rhetoric rather than critique.

Climate displacement is where the argument terminates because it is where the questions converge. People displaced by climatic change fall outside the Refugee Convention, most of their movement is internal and undercounted, planned relocation produces adaptation and maladaptation together, and faith communities are frequently the first responders and are largely absent from the frameworks that govern response. None of this is addressed by improving how individuals manage what they already hold.

The reframing proposed here is therefore not a supplement to stewardship ethics but a replacement of its governing question. Not how should we manage the estate, but on what terms is the estate held, and by whom, and what is owed to those it has displaced. The Jubilee may never have been practised. It remains the only answer the tradition has offered to the question that matters, and a tradition that keeps an unenforced law in its canon has at least admitted what it owes.

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