

HUMAN EXPLOITATION OF NATURE IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND ESCHATOLOGY: A THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE CONTEMPORARY ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary ecological crisis triggered by the massive exploitation of nature raises profound theological questions regarding the relationship between humanity, God, and creation. This study aims to analyze environmental exploitation from the perspective of Christian ethics and eschatology as a matter of ethics and faith. The method used is a descriptive qualitative approach with a critical-theological analysis through a literature review of biblical texts, theological works, and contextual studies. The results of the study indicate that ecological damage reflects humanity's failure to carry out its divine mandate as stewards of creation and reveals a personal and structural ethical crisis. Eschatological hope is understood not in an apocalyptic sense, but as a transformative call towards the restoration of creation. Therefore, Christian ethics and eschatology cannot be separated in responding to the ecological crisis, as both call believers and the church to participate actively and responsibly in God's redemptive work on the earth.

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INTRODUCTIONS

The ecological crisis occurring in almost all parts of the world today has become a defining phenomenon of our time. Climate change and human-induced natural disasters continue to increase each year, inevitably exerting serious impacts on the economy, politics, social life, culture, and the overall quality of human life (Siburian, 2014). The current ecological crisis has emerged as one of the most urgent global challenges, extending beyond transnational boundaries to national and regional levels. Environmental degradation has become a global issue that triggers collective concern and continues to intensify significantly each year. This phenomenon not only results in declining quality of life but has also reached a critical point that threatens the very existence of humanity as a whole (Northcott, 1999).

According to a report by CNN, Indonesia is a tropical country with the third-largest tropical rainforest in the world after Brazil and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Www.Cnnindonesia.Com, n.d.). However, Indonesia is now facing severe ecological pressure due to increasingly intensive and massive human exploitation of natural resources. Ecosystem destruction has triggered various environmental phenomena that directly affect social, economic, and biotic life, including the rising intensity of natural disasters. This phenomenon necessitates theological interrogation, but also raises ethical and theological questions concerning human responsibility as stewards of God's

creation.

The Ministry of Forestry released the latest statistical data showing that Indonesia's forest area in 2024 reached approximately 95.5 million hectares, or about 51.1% of the country's total land area, after experiencing net deforestation of around 175.4 thousand hectares during that year (Www.Kehutanan.Go.Id, n.d.). These figures reflect mounting pressure on forest resources, largely caused by agricultural expansion, plantation development, and other activities. Furthermore, data compiled by Global Forest Watch and the World Resources Institute (WRI) indicate that in 2024 Indonesia lost millions of hectares of tree cover. This number nearly doubled compared to 2023, making Indonesia one of the significant contributors to global deforestation (Pers, n.d.).

Beyond forestry statistics, disaster data in Indonesia also reveal an alarming trend. Walhi recorded that floods and landslides in Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra on November 25–27, 2025, resulted in 442 deaths, 402 missing persons, and 156,918 displaced people. These figures do not yet include the moral and material losses suffered by the victims (Siaran Pers, n.d.). Such disasters occurred due to increasing ecological vulnerability caused by changes in forest ecosystems and exacerbated by forest exploitation. Moreover, the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB) reported a high number of disasters during 2024–2025, predominantly hydrometeorological in nature, involving floods and landslides across various regions. In 2025 alone, BNPB recorded more than two thousand disaster events related to forest and land fires (antara, n.d.).

The integration of deforestation rates and the increasing frequency of disasters demonstrates a complex correlation between anthropogenic activities and environmental degradation experienced by society. This perspective differs from interpretations that regard disasters as purely natural phenomena without clear causes. Instead, it situates them within a framework of socio-ecological causality that demands serious attention. Environmental issues, therefore, are not merely technical, economic, or political in nature, but also deeply moral and spiritual.

Christian theology is called to offer critical reflection grounded in Scripture to re-examine how humans should relate to nature as God's creation. The Bible clearly defines this relationship in the creation narrative. Humans are entrusted with the mandate to "till and keep" the earth (Genesis 2:15), not to exercise domination or exploit creation without limits, but to manage it responsibly so that all things may flourish in order.

Furthermore, the contemporary ecological crisis raises theological questions within the framework of Christian eschatology. Popular discourse often associates natural disasters with eschatological signs, yet such approaches are vulnerable to apocalyptic speculation lacking solid analytical foundations. Authentic Christian eschatology, however, provides a reflective framework that not only concerns future events but also connects the hope of cosmic restoration with present ethical praxis. This perspective is reflected in biblical texts such as Romans 8:19–22 and Revelation 11:18, which place the suffering of creation within a moral narrative and a cosmic hope that calls humanity to responsibility.

To date, theological studies are considered insufficiently developed in linking environmental destruction with faith-based responsibility, particularly in the context of ecological crises in regions such as Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra. Eschatological discourse often becomes trapped in future predictions without generating tangible concern for the environment. Through this paper, the author seeks to examine the phenomenon of environmental exploitation from the perspectives of Christian ethics and eschatology, aiming to demonstrate that today's ecological challenges constitute an urgent call that demands serious attention and transformative changes in attitudes, behavior, and moral responsibility among believers.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach and a descriptive–analytical literature review. This approach is chosen because the focus of the research lies in examining the concepts, meanings, and theological implications of environmental exploitation from the perspectives of Christian ethics and eschatology, which require deep, reflective, and interpretative analysis of biblical texts and academic literature in a comprehensive manner, (Zaluchu, 2021).

The data sources used in this study consist of primary sources in the form of biblical texts that serve as the theological foundation for discussions on Christian ethics and eschatological references. Secondary sources include books and journal articles that address environmental ethics, practical theology, and eschatology from a Christian

perspective. In addition, this study utilizes empirical documentary data from external institutions, such as reports and statistical data from official agencies including the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK) and the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB).

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Human Mandate toward God's Creation from a Biblical Perspective

Theological reflection on human exploitation of nature must be grounded in a deep understanding of the creation mandate as recorded in Genesis 1–2. The creation narrative is not merely a historical account of origins, but a normative foundation for the ethical relationship between God, humanity, and the rest of creation. In the context of the contemporary ecological crisis, interpretation of the creation texts must be conducted through careful exegesis and hermeneutics of the original Hebrew language, so that the human mandate over God's creation is not misunderstood in an anthropocentric and exploitative manner.

Within Christian theological discourse, Genesis 2:15 explicitly states that the LORD God placed humanity in the Garden of Eden. The Hebrew phrase *לַעֲבֹדָה וְלִשְׁמֶרָה* (*le'avdah uleshāmrāh*), translated as “to till and to keep,” affirms that nature should not be viewed merely as empty space or as a passive background for human existence. Rather, there exists a fundamental and complex relationship between humanity and nature that transcends superficial understanding.

The verb *עָבַד* (*'avad*) means “to work” or “to cultivate,” while *שָׁמַר* (*shamar*) means “to guard,” “to protect,” or “to preserve.” Together, these terms emphasize that God's mandate is not destructive domination, but respectful and responsible stewardship. From the beginning, nature is a partner entrusted by God to humanity, not an object for exploitation. Utomo argues that the relationship between humans and nature is not a subject–object relationship, but one of responsible service (Utomo, 2020). Furthermore, Banks asserts that humanity's existence as the image of God carries fundamental ethical implications. Since God is an active, working God (*Deus Actus*), humans as His representatives are inherently called to manifest this divine nature through meaningful and constructive labor (Banks, 2008).

Thus, Genesis 2:15 establishes the human mandate as an ethical–liturgical calling rather than merely an extractive economic activity. Any form of environmental exploitation that damages ecosystems and ignores the principle of sustainability stands in direct contradiction to the theological essence of the terms *'avad* and *shamar*. This perspective affirms that the contemporary ecological crisis is not simply a technical or environmental issue, but a profound failure of humanity to fulfill its vocation as steward of creation.

Debates in ecological theology also frequently focus on Genesis 1:26–28, particularly on the terms *רָדָה* (*rādāh*, “to rule”) and *כָּבַשׁ* (*kābaš*, “to subdue”). In misguided and ahistorical readings, these words are often used to justify exploitative human domination over nature. However, exegetical analysis reveals that *rādāh* refers to an ethical and responsible model of leadership, analogous to a just king who governs for the well-being of those under his care (Nasr & Zaman, 2021).

This understanding is reinforced by Psalm 24:1, which declares, *לַיהוָה הָאָרֶץ* (*La-Yahweh ha'aretz*), “The earth is the LORD's.” Humanity does not own creation; it is merely granted permission to manage it responsibly. Therefore, all forms of environmental exploitation that result in ecological destruction and disasters constitute a denial of God's mandate. Steck argues that “subduing” the earth should not be understood as oppression, but as cultivating the land so that it may produce sustenance for both humans and animals (Steck, 1980). Likewise, Brown emphasizes that as God's representatives on earth, humans are obligated to emulate the responsibility exemplified by God Himself (Brown, 1999).

Consequently, the creation mandate embedded in the terms *'abad*, *shamar*, *rādāh*, and *kābaš* must be understood as a call to care for, preserve, and manage creation responsibly. Environmental exploitation is therefore not merely an ecological or social issue, but a theological one that directly concerns Christian ethics. Moreover, this biblical foundation opens space for eschatological reflection, in which ecological restoration and preservation are integral to Christian hope (Manongga, 2025)

Environmental Exploitation as a Crisis of Christian Ethics

From the perspective of Christian ethics, when nature is reduced to a mere object of economic interest and human progress, what occurs is essentially an ethical failure to understand humanity's position as steward of creation before God and among fellow creatures (Hessel & Rasmussen, 2001). Thus, the massive environmental exploitation taking place in Indonesia within the context of the contemporary ecological crisis cannot be adequately interpreted as a purely technical or economic problem; rather, it must be recognized as a profound ethical crisis. Christian ethics rejects any worldview that places humanity at the center of reality in a way that legitimizes unlimited exploitation of nature. Wright asserts that humans are not owners of creation, but servants entrusted with the care of God's world (Wright, 2004).

This ethical crisis becomes even more evident when environmental exploitation is carried out in a structured and systemic manner. Large-scale deforestation legitimized by economic systems and political policies demonstrates that sin in the ecological context is no longer merely personal, but structural. Cone's theology affirms that sin is not only an individual reality but also a social and institutionalized force that destroys the order of life (Cone, 1997). In contemporary Indonesian theological discourse, Wahyu, through the Sarapanpagi Biblika forum, interprets ecological disasters such as the devastating floods in Sumatra in 2025 as evidence of humanity's failure to fulfill the creation mandate, and calls for ecological repentance that includes reforming policies that harm the environment (RitaWahyu, n.d.). Barram similarly proposes balanced and sustainable resource management that meets human needs while preserving nature for future generations, enabling harmonious coexistence between humanity and the environment (Barram, 2006). In line with this, Marx states that humans are not absolute owners of the earth and its contents, but merely inhabitants who must leave it in good condition for those who come after them (Bottomore, 2001).

The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann argues that an ecological doctrine of creation demands a paradigm shift in understanding God's existence. He emphasizes that such a doctrine does not focus on separating God from the world, but on God's presence in the world and the world's presence in God. This theological vision underscores divine immanence throughout creation and thus calls humanity to act as God's agents in addressing ecological concerns (Moltmann, 1985). Accordingly, the widespread environmental exploitation that has led to disasters in Indonesia demands a serious theological response, in which Christian ethics critically examines destructive structures and practices while forming moral awareness among believers to regard environmental care as an integral expression of obedience to God the Creator.

A Christian Eschatological Perspective on the Ecological Crisis

In Christian understanding, eschatological hope is always ethical. Believers view the end times not as something frightening but as the culmination of hope. Christian eschatology not only speaks of the future but also shapes the life orientation of believers in the present (Moltmann, 2001). The vision of the restoration of creation, the hope of a new heaven and a new earth, places God's people in a concrete ethical calling to respond to the ecological crisis. God promises to renew all creation, and therefore His people are called to anticipate this promise through responsible practices toward their surroundings. The joy of the fulfillment of God's promise cannot be separated from concern for the environment, which is currently experiencing an ecological crisis due to human greed.

Katu stated that protecting and preserving the environment is not merely a moral obligation, but a form of spiritual obedience rooted in a conscious recognition that nature is God's good and valuable work (Hina et al., 2020). Therefore, within this framework, ecological issues from a Christian perspective are closely related to humanity's calling to care for the earth. Christian eschatology provides a relevant theological foundation for environmental ethics. Through ecological education, strengthening faith awareness, and involvement in public policy advocacy, churches and Christian communities play a role in realizing ecological responsibility in society.

In the study of Revelation 21:3-4, Christian eschatology emphasizes that end-time hope is active and transformative. Eschatological joy is directed toward anticipating a new reality and the presence of its signs in the world today. God's presence with His people, the restoration of relationships, and the renewal of creation form the theological foundation for a Christian ethic that prioritizes solidarity, justice, and environmental sustainability. The church today is called to live as an eschatological community that allows the joy of hope to flow into concrete and impactful actions, so that Christians become witnesses of the new reality that God will perfect.

The uncertainty of the timing of Christ's second coming provides moral value for the lives of believers.

Christian eschatology does not lead believers to anxiety or chronological speculation, but rather guides them to lives of holiness, faithfulness, and integrity. This uncertainty reminds believers that life is an opportunity to glorify God through righteous and responsible action (Elisabet et al., 2024). Ladd, adding that God's command in the Bible regarding patience and perseverance in awaiting the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, emphasizes that Christian hope must be realized in faithful and fruitful lives, without neglecting worldly responsibilities (Ladd, 1974). In line with this, Hoekema said that biblical eschatology was never intended to cause fear and apathy, instead eschatology is seen as a great joy of hope in Christ (Hoekema, 1994).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the exploitation of nature by human beings must be understood not only as an ecological issue but also as a theological one, directly related to Christian ethics and eschatological hope. When environmental exploitation occurs on a massive and destructive scale, it signifies a crisis in the relationship between humanity, God, and creation. From a Christian perspective, human beings are called to serve as God's representatives, bearing responsibility for the care and stewardship of creation. Christian ethics also recognizes humanity's failure to fulfill this divine mandate; a faith that is detached from ecological responsibility risks becoming reductive and lacking contextual relevance. Moreover, Christian ethics emphasizes that obedience to God is expressed not only in a vertical relationship with Him, but also in horizontal relationships manifested through responsibility and integrity toward the environment.

In the context of the contemporary ecological crisis, eschatological hope finds its relevance in a committed effort to protect and preserve creation. Waiting for the return of Christ does not justify neglecting ecological crises; rather, it demands active involvement in environmental stewardship. In line with this, contextual theological reflection in Indonesia affirms that natural disasters, deforestation, and environmental degradation must receive serious attention from Christians. The Church is called to be a blessing by embodying the early signs of the Kingdom of God through concrete actions.

Thus, this study affirms that Christian ethics and eschatology are closely interconnected in responding to the ecological crisis in Indonesia. Hope for the restoration of God's creation strengthens the ethical responsibility of believers to care for the earth as an expression of faith. In the light of Christian theology, environmental exploitation is not a sign that the world is merely heading toward destruction, but rather a prophetic call for God's people to live faithfully, responsibly, and to participate in God's redemptive work for all creation.

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