

The Escapism Of Adventist Ecotheology Under The Shadow Of Monovalent Hermeneutics And Anthro-Theo-Eschatology

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Abstract - Environmental issues are among the most urgent global challenges of the 21st century, requiring not only technical solutions but also multidisciplinary approaches. In this context, eco-theology emerges as a vital alternative, linking faith with ecological responsibility. However, this study argues that the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church has not given sufficient or serious attention to ecological issues, either theologically or practically. Environmental engagement within Adventism remains largely sloganistic, lacking deep reflection in its doctrines and praxis. This research contends that the absence of serious SDA involvement in environmental concerns stems not merely from a lack of awareness or information, but from theological and hermeneutical problems. Using a qualitative descriptive-argumentative approach, this study analyzes the biblical interpretive foundation within Adventism, which is still heavily dominated by a monovalent hermeneutic—that is, an emphasis on a single, objective meaning derived from a historical-grammatical method. This hermeneutic tends to be apologetic and closed to more dynamic, contextual readings, including those focused on ecological issues. Furthermore, the church's anthropocentric and theocentric eschatology, which emphasizes Christ's second coming and the future new earth, reinforces an escapist attitude toward the present world. As a result, the church prioritizes final salvation over ethical engagement with current global issues. This study recommends a paradigm shift in Adventist hermeneutics toward an eco-hermeneutical approach that can integrate Adventist faith with ecological responsibility in a theological, prophetic, and contextual manner. In doing so, the church may become a spiritually relevant actor in responding to the global ecological crisis with transformative impact.

Key words: eco-theology; hermeneutic; eschatology; Seventh Day Adventist (SDA)

I. INTRODUCTION

Indeed, the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA Church) has proclaimed prophetic voices that defend the interests of nature within the framework of ecological responsibility based on theological understanding; the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy. However, when compared to other major denominations such as the Catholic Church—which possesses magisterial documents like *Laudato Si*—the Adventist Church appears not to occupy a leading

position in promoting the preservation of the cosmos. Nevertheless, this cannot be interpreted as the absence of concern regarding the ecological crisis.

In various academic forums and theological publications, Adventist thinkers have formulated interdisciplinary research approaches to theology and nature, or ecotheology. For example, Siyamthanda Mqhayisa highlights the importance of placing hope in the new world in eschatology without forgetting the care for nature. Daniel Gonzalez-Socoloske outlines the significance of nature and how Adventist education tends to be anthropocentric. Also, the study conducted by Floyd and William Hayes discusses the importance of environmental stewardship. Even research at Andrews Seminary has introduced terminology and initiatives that can be understood as pilot projects to actualize Adventist ecotheological spirituality in church praxis and education—eco-stewardship. These initiatives show the presence of a contextual and prophetic theo-ecological awareness, even though it is still in a growing phase compared to the more established ecotheological movements in the global ecumenical environment.

But the serious issue lies in the paradox where the church promotes eco-stewardship and various other minor academic studies, while at the same time failing to recognize the internal challenges related to monovalent hermeneutics and anthro-ptheo-eschatology. To this, there needs to be flexibility in interpreting key texts related to Adventist identity and also a more balanced emphasis on eco-centrism so that the idea of ecotheology does not merely become empty rhetoric, or even theological utopianism, but becomes more operational and practical. Thus, the research question posed in this article is: what can be learned from Adventist hermeneutics and eschatology concerning the church's concern for environmental issues so that the idea of ecotheology does not stuck at empty rhetoric?

This article is an attempt to carry out *Shaping Global Solutions Through Interdisciplinary Research*. Therefore, to answer the research question and maintain the main argument, the first part will explain the concept of Adventist hermeneutics which has become stagnant in the romanticization of the Adventist Approach, believing only in a single meaning for each text. This rigidity causes the Bible text to have no room to convey ecological awareness. Furthermore, the article will discuss eschatological doctrines that emphasize the new world, thereby trapping believers in the concept of dualism; the temporal world and the eternal. That is why there needs to be an emphasis on concern for nature or the current world. In the final section, this article provides a reflection of current theological situation where can be read from a 'green' perspective.

II. DISCUSSION

Hermeneutical Romanticism: From Monovalency to Polivalency

The hermeneutical direction of the SDA Church has traditionally been characterized by a strong emphasis on preserving established doctrines and defending core beliefs through apologetic interpretations of Scripture. This approach not only protects unique theological

positions, such as the Three Angels' Message (TAM) and the significance of the Sabbath, but also interprets these doctrines within a prophetic and eschatological framework. Such a focus ensures that doctrinal continuity and stability are maintained over time. However, there is a growing discourse within the church advocating for engagement with contextual hermeneutics, or also eco-hermeneutics. This shift towards more dynamic and progressive interpretations could foster a more relevant interaction between Adventist theology and the evolving global cultural landscape. By embracing a more flexible approach, SDA hermeneutics can explore contemporary applications of Scripture, thus enabling a deeper and more meaningful connection with modern believers.

In evidence, the BRI (Biblical Research Institute) emphasizes the historical-grammatical method as the appropriate approach to understanding biblical texts. This organization, directly connected to the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, is tasked with addressing doctrinal issues. During the 2015 General Conference Session in San Antonio, Texas, a proposal was presented that underscored the need for a more profound examination of Adventist hermeneutics. Concerns were raised regarding the varying interpretations of the same Scriptures across the global church, suggesting a division in hermeneutical approaches. In response, the committee recognized the importance of this issue and decided to collaborate with the BRI (Biblical Research Institute) to explore it further. The Institute has initiated studies on the matter and intends to publish a revised second edition of its existing work on biblical interpretation. Composed of selected Adventist theologians and experts in various fields—such as biblical studies, systematic theology, and hermeneutics—the BRI plays a crucial role in maintaining the rigidity of Adventist hermeneutics and preserving the integrity of church doctrine. This reflects the ongoing tension between traditional interpretations and the need for a more flexible, contextually aware approach within the church.

In order to counter any method of modern interpretation, the BRI issued a book entitled *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*. Throughout the book, it defends an old-fashioned perspective and attacks any new approaches. Grammatical-historical interpretation is believed to be the proper way to explore the Bible as it assumes the autonomy of the interpreter, involves the presence of divine power, and is not constrained by any external authority. The book describes a shift in biblical interpretation, where the focus has moved away from the author and the text toward the reader, particularly in postmodern approaches. This new interpretive situation is seen as urgent because meaning is no longer fixed in the text or authorial intent but is instead shaped by the reader or the interpretive community. According to postmodernist views, since readers interpret subjectively, no ultimate or objective meaning can be found in a text. The meaning is considered multivalent and relative, rather than definitive. This results in the main criticism of postmodernism, which is its relativism — denying that any text has a single, objective meaning. This view implies that meaning changes depending on the interpreter, thus lacking consistency and objectivity.

The Adventist hermeneutical approach emphasizes maintaining the original, historical-grammatical method as its primary tool for interpreting Scripture, strongly opposing modern interpretive trends that it views as leading toward relativism or subjectivity. This resistance is

especially pronounced against postmodern hermeneutical approaches, which prioritize reader-response and contextual factors that, from the Adventist perspective, might dilute or distort the objective meaning of the biblical text. Adventist theologians argue that abandoning the historical-grammatical method risks allowing interpretation to become overly influenced by personal or cultural biases, thereby falling into a kind of interpretive subjectivity, where the text's meaning is shaped more by the reader's perspective than by its original intent. Such a shift could undermine doctrinal stability, which Adventist theology seeks to preserve through consistent and literal engagement with Scripture. Thus, the Adventist approach remains cautious of interpretive trends that stray too far from the fixed meaning found in the biblical text.

An Adventist author, Marco Lukic, criticizes the book *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*, stating that it is purely an apologetic work, written to defend the church's position rather than fostering open interfaith or interacademic discussions. Lukic argues that the book was created to prove that the Adventist tradition of hermeneutics is the only correct one, while dismissing other approaches as improper. He views the book as a tool to protect the church's tradition and doctrines, thereby closing off any opportunities for new insights. In contrast, Silvia Bacchiocchi fully supports and praises the book, offering almost no critique. This could be understood in the context of her being a graduate of Andrews University, a significant institution that produces many Adventist scholars and members of the BRI.

In September 2024, during a pastoral meeting in the Netherlands Union or Synod, I had the opportunity to hear from notable Adventist theologians, Alberto Timm and Frank Hasel, both of whom are heavily involved in the development of the book *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*. Their message was clear and direct: the church must remain steadfast in its commitment to the historical-grammatical method of biblical interpretation. They emphasized that altering the church's hermeneutical approach would inevitably lead to doctrinal changes, something the Adventist Church seeks to avoid. Timm and Hasel reiterated the foundational importance of a consistent hermeneutical method, cautioning that the adoption of postmodern or reader-response methods could lead to relativism, thereby compromising the objective understanding of Scripture that has long underpinned Adventist theology and beliefs. Their words reinforced the church's mission to protect doctrinal purity by preserving the traditional interpretative approach.

However, we are not fully a supporter of postmodernism, nor we are a prominent protester against the historical-grammatical method. What is essential, though, is that the SDA does not open itself to alternative approaches that could make the text more relevant and vibrant for ecology issue. Additionally, it tends to blame other approaches, which are more relative and respectful of diversity, as inappropriate methods. In this case, even Revelation 14:6-12 is not truly interpreted through the historical-grammatical method but rather through an apologetic lens with its monovalency. With all this evidence, we argue that the Adventist hermeneutical approach has fallen into a romantic attachment to an outdated method. This has led to the interpretation of Revelation 14:6-12 being generalized across all contexts, where the essence of its message remains unchanged—focused on Sabbath, fear, judgment, and

eschatological speculation. Adventist's hermeneutic has become crystallized to monovalency instead of polyvalency meaning, remaining a fossil of the past that is being presented as relevant to modern congregations from diverse contexts.

The historical-grammatical approach in Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutics has long been upheld as the authoritative method for biblical interpretation, emphasizing authorial intent, historical context, and grammatical structure. While this method has contributed to theological stability and the preservation of core doctrines such as the eschatology, it has also led to an interpretive monovalency—a rigid insistence on one fixed meaning of the text. This hermeneutical rigidity limits the scope of biblical engagement, effectively excluding other valid interpretive lenses, including those that respond to contemporary challenges. The result is a hermeneutical framework that is apologetic rather than prophetic, and static rather than dynamic, hindering the church's ability to engage meaningfully with evolving global realities.

One significant consequence of this monovalent interpretation is the church's failure to engage with ecological theology or eco-hermeneutics. By prioritizing eschatological warnings and doctrinal purity, traditional Adventist interpretations often neglect themes of creation care, environmental justice, and the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world—despite their presence in Scripture. Texts such as Genesis 2:15, Psalm 24:1, and Romans 8:19–23 speak profoundly about God's relationship with creation and humanity's role in its stewardship. However, when interpreted solely through a historical-grammatical lens with eschatological urgency, these texts are often subordinated to spiritualized or end-time readings, stripping them of their ecological and ethical dimensions. The church's preoccupation with doctrinal defense has therefore obscured opportunities for developing a theology that speaks to the ecological crisis.

There is an urgent theological and ethical imperative for the Adventist Church to cultivate an eco-hermeneutical consciousness—one that integrates the responsibility to care for creation as part of the Adventist faith identity. Scripture, when approached through a multidimensional hermeneutic, affirms not only the hope of redemption but also the sacredness of the created world. Theological fidelity does not require the abandonment of historical insights but calls for a broadened interpretive imagination that engages both the past and the present. Embracing eco-hermeneutics would not only revitalize Adventist theology in light of current ecological concerns, but also reframe eschatology as a hope that includes the renewal of the earth, rather than its abandonment. Without such a shift, the church risks perpetuating a theology that lacks empathy and prophetic relevance to the most pressing global crisis of our time.

From Anthro-Eschatology and Theo-Eschatology to Eco-Eschatology

One of the most prominent identities of the SDA church is its emphasis on eschatology. The SDA was born from the Adventist movement that was historically and theologically formed on the basis of belief in the second coming of Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of God's promise concerning the end of time. Within this framework, the church does not merely teach eschatological doctrine as theological knowledge, but makes it an existential identity of the

church. This eschatological hope is articulated through a systematic and prophetic interpretation of the Bible, positioning the end of time as a certain and urgent reality. Efri Siahaan and Exon Pane argue that God offers salvation through the doctrine of the sanctuary and the three angels' messages to all sinners. The sanctuary doctrine calls all sinners to seek salvation in God and make Him the center of true worship. The third angel's message also invites all to worship the true God and make Him the center of everything. God's character is reflected in both the doctrine of the sanctuary and the three angels' messages. These two doctrines are a present eschatology that are interrelated. The core of the sanctuary doctrine and the three angels' messages is Jesus Christ who died sacrificing Himself on the cross to redeem sinners.

Therefore, the church consistently affirms that this world is heading toward the climax of the history of redemption, which will be concluded by the coming of Christ, the final judgment, and the restoration of creation. As a consequence, eschatology neglects environmental restoration; the church disregards conservation efforts, and places humans and God as the center of the universe. In fact, if God is positioned as the center of religion, then the people should care for nature because nature is a divine manifestation within the Christian tradition.

As an impact, SDA eschatology is not free from internal glorification of the theocentric and anthropocentric dimensions. On one hand, the church emphasizes the supremacy of God in the orchestration of the end of time—highlighting the glory and divine sovereignty that will be fully revealed at the Parousia. On the other hand, this eschatological hope also contains anthropocentric elements, by inviting believers to prepare themselves actively through repentance, obedience to God's law, and mission involvement. This tension raises a theological question: is the primary orientation of Adventist eschatology centered on God's glory or human salvation? To answer this, the church needs to affirm that these two dimensions do not negate one another, but complement each other. Thus, the church must continually refine the balance of its eschatological narrative so as not to fall into the dichotomy of passive theism or excessive anthropocentric activism, but rather reorient itself toward eco-eschatology.

The SDA tendency toward anthropocentric and theocentric eschatology within its doctrinal tradition often creates tension between an orientation toward the new world and engagement with the present world. The hope for the promised new world in eschatological narratives—whether understood as a heavenly realm or the renewed earth—has theological consequences that tend to separate divine and earthly realities. Influenced by dualistic thinking, this world is seen as temporary, corrupted, and soon to pass away, while the new world is regarded as the only true and eternal destination. This paradigm results in a tendency to neglect social and ecological responsibilities toward the current creation. Glenn Tielung and Tony Rudyansjah, in their eco-theological research, reveal that one cause of the absence of conservation efforts for endemic native animals in Minahasa—especially due to massive consumption by the local Christian-Minahasan community—is this dualistic belief that disregards environmental sustainability.

Theologically, this dualistic view distorts the biblical vision of God's relationship with creation. The creation narrative in Genesis affirms that the world was "very good" (Gen. 1:31), and throughout Scripture, it is evident that God cares for, rather than abandons, His creation. The hope for the new world, as presented in Revelation 21, is not the creation of a reality completely disconnected from the present world, but a total renewal of the old earth and heaven. Therefore, when the church proclaims a unilateral and non-contextual eschatological theology, it actually weakens the divine mandate to "till and keep" the earth (Gen. 2:15).

Within the framework of anthropocentric eschatology, human involvement in the restoration process cannot be substituted solely by God's actions. The hope for the new world should encourage believers to affirm ethical responsibility in caring for the environment, advocating justice, and upholding human dignity. If eschatological hope is understood passively, merely waiting for divine intervention, then the church has relinquished its prophetic role in the concrete history of the world. A healthy eschatology should motivate tangible action—not escapism from reality, but rather the preservation and stewardship of creation.

Therefore, it is important for the church to reformulate a holistic eschatological narrative rooted in the wholeness of creation. The dualism between the temporal world and the new world should not alienate believers from the present reality, but rather inspire active engagement in manifesting the signs of God's kingdom in this world. Responsible eschatology is one that integrates faith and action, future hope and present responsibility—not an eschatology focused solely on the hope of the new world, as semiotically expressed by Mireille Kembuan in *Marching to Zion*, an eschatology that moves toward a new Zion.¹ Without this integration, eschatology will only become a theological illusion that separates religion from urgent social and ecological responsibility. Furthermore, eschatology that takes present responsibility seriously is eco-eschatology—an implementation of theo-eschatology itself and evidence of anthro-eschatology.

Escapism

The SDA has a theological heritage deeply influenced by anthropocentric and theocentric eschatology—the hope for the second coming of Jesus as the climax of salvation history and the restoration of the divine order. However, this eschatological hope is often articulated through a monovalent hermeneutic that emphasizes a single fixed meaning of the text, especially through the historical-grammatical approach. While this pattern provides doctrinal stability, it simultaneously fosters a tendency toward escapism—a flight from the reality of the present world to the world to come. As a result, the biblical narrative about human responsibility toward the earth and all creatures is often overlooked or reduced to merely a prelude before the end times.

¹ KEMBUAN, MIREILLE YOLANNIE THESSA. "Makna Eskatologi Dalam Seventh Day Adventist Hymnal (Analisis Semiotika)." *JURNAL ELEKTRONIK FAKULTAS SASTRA UNIVERSITAS SAM RATULANGI* 3, no. 1 (2018).

Theologically, this tendency has weakened ecological commitment within SDA theology because the current world is seen only as a temporary place that will soon pass away. By rejecting contextual or multivocal hermeneutical approaches, Adventism tends to ignore the suffering voice of the earth as well as the divine call to care for and steward God's creation (Genesis 2:15). Yet, the biblical understanding of salvation encompasses not only the human soul but also the restoration of all creation (Romans 8:19–22). Therefore, theological courage is needed to reinterpret eschatology and expand the horizons of SDA hermeneutics to accommodate a contextual and prophetic ecotheology—an approach that does not abandon eschatological hope but incarnates it in genuine care for a wounded world.

III. CONCLUSION

The absence polyvalency interpretation decrease the possibilities of ecological interpretation in the SDA Church. The dominance of monovalent interpretation, shaped by the historical-grammatical method, has produced a rigid reading of Scripture that limits its capacity to engage with contemporary ecological concerns. Likewise, the church's anthropocentric and theocentric eschatology contributes to an escapist worldview—one that prioritizes the hope of the new earth over the stewardship of the current one. This theological posture has led to a dualistic perspective, where the present world is viewed as temporary and therefore less worthy of care, resulting in minimal ecological responsibility within Adventist praxis.

A critical reflection on this condition invites the church to re-examine its hermeneutical tools and eschatological orientation. By adopting an eco-hermeneutical lens, the SDA Church has the opportunity to reframe its mission in light of the pressing global ecological crisis and seeing the text and social reality in a 'green' perspective. Such a shift would not undermine its core theological convictions but would instead expand its prophetic voice to include creation care as a vital part of its gospel message. The church is called not only to await the new heaven and new earth but to participate actively in God's ongoing work of sustaining creation. In doing so, Adventism can bridge the gap between hope and responsibility, between theology and ecology—affirming that faithfulness to God also entails faithfulness in preserving the integrity of the earth.

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