

Beyond Stewardship: Toward a Batak Toba Eco-Theology of Friendship and Relational Ontology

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Abstract

The ecological crisis in the Batak lands, manifested in flooding, landslides, pollution of Lake Toba, and forest degradation, reflects a crisis of relationship between humanity, nature, and God rooted in an anthropocentric paradigm. Although global ecotheology has critiqued this paradigm through the concept of stewardship, such an approach is considered to retain hierarchical relational structures. This article aims to formulate a Batak Toba ecotheology of friendship as a post-stewardship relational ontology by positioning local cosmology as a locus theologicus. This study employs a qualitative-theological approach using Stephen B. Bevans's anthropological model of contextual theology, based on a literature review and critical analysis of the dialogue between the ecological crisis, Batak Toba cosmology, and Christian theological reflection. The findings indicate that the human-nature relationship in Batak Toba cosmology is genealogical and communal, whereby ecological responsibility is understood as fidelity to cosmic kinship. This paradigm offers a transformative spiritual-ethical framework for the church in responding to ecological crises in a contextual and sustainable manner.

Keywords: batak toba cosmology; contextual theology; ecotheology of friendship; post-stewardship; relational ontology; toba eco-theology

Abstrak

Krisis ekologis di Tanah Batak, yang tampak dalam banjir, longsor, pencemaran Danau Toba, dan degradasi hutan, mencerminkan krisis relasi antara manusia, alam, dan Allah yang berakar pada paradigma antroposentris. Meskipun ekoteologi global telah mengkritiknya melalui konsep stewardship, pendekatan ini dinilai masih menyisakan struktur relasional yang hierarkis. Artikel ini bertujuan merumuskan ekoteologi persahabatan Batak Toba sebagai ontologi relasional pasca-stewardship dengan menjadikan kosmologi lokal sebagai locus theologicus. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-teologis melalui metode teologi kontekstual model Antropologi Stephen B. Bevans, berbasis studi pustaka dan analisis kritis atas dialog antara krisis ekologis, kosmologi Batak Toba, dan refleksi teologis Kristen. Melalui dekonstruksi teks-teks kultural, kajian ini mengonstruksi ulang relasi manusia-alam dalam kosmologi Batak Toba yang bersifat genealogis dan komunal menjadi sebuah etika kesetiaan kosmik. Kebaruan yang ditemukan adalah konseptualisasi hubungan non-hierarkis di mana alam bertindak sebagai subjek mitra, yang menawarkan kerangka spiritual-etis bagi gereja dalam merespons krisis ekologis secara kontekstual dan berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: ekoteologi persahabatan; kosmologi batak toba; ontologi relasional; pasca-penatalayanan; teologi kontekstual; ekoteologi toba

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, particularly during the latter part of 2025, the Batak region has been confronted with a series of escalating ecological disasters, including flash floods, landslides, the sedimentation and pollution of Lake Toba, and the continued loss of forest cover due to

land conversion and intensive natural resource extraction. These environmental crises cannot be adequately interpreted as merely isolated natural phenomena; rather, they represent symptoms of a broader and structurally embedded ecological crisis. Such an interpretation aligns with the findings of environmental studies and the assessments of ecological observers in Indonesia, which suggest that the increasing frequency and severity of ecological disasters are closely linked to anthropogenic factors. Consequently, environmental degradation in the region reflects not only ecological imbalances but also the cumulative impacts of unsustainable development practices and inadequate environmental governance.

Analysis by the North Sumatra Forum for the Environment (WALHI) and Mongabay field data specifically shows that massive exploitation in the Tapanuli region, particularly the destruction of the Tapanuli (Batang Toru) forest ecosystem, has triggered a drastic loss of environmental carrying capacity, which has resulted in an intensification of flash floods and landslides in areas around indigenous peoples' settlements.¹ This crisis is rooted in a shift in the pattern of human relations with nature, from one of shared living to one of exploitation and instrumentalism. Landscapes, once understood as shared spaces, are now increasingly treated as economic commodities. This environmental damage is fundamentally inseparable from the fracturing of relations between humans and nature, between communities and traditions, and even between faith and everyday practices.² This theological perspective opens up the possibility of interpreting the ecological crisis not merely as a technical or economic issue, but as a crisis of meaning and spirituality.

With this understanding, the ecological crisis occurring in Batak Land can be interpreted as part of a broader dynamic: not simply a matter of environmental degradation, but also a relational and spiritual crisis that touches on identity, life values, and how Batak people interpret land, nature, and ancestral heritage in the light of Christian faith. This theological understanding that sees the ecological crisis as a crisis of relationship and spirituality has direct implications for church life. If environmental damage reflects a rift in the relationship between humans, God, and creation, then the church cannot position itself as a neutral party or mere observer. The church instead becomes a space for critical reflection and a practice of faith that determines how the theology of creation is translated into concrete attitudes, teachings, and actions amidst the social and ecological contexts faced.

This situation presents a serious theological challenge for churches in the Tapanuli region. The church is called to re-examine the theology of creation that has been taught and lived out in the practice of faith. Theological readings still overshadowed by an anthropocentric paradigm often fail to foster a profound and transformative ecological awareness. Within this framework, nature is understood more as an object of human responsibility than as a fellow creature with intrinsic value before God. As a result, ecological responsibility is often reduced to a secondary moral obligation or an additional issue, rather than an integral part of Christian spirituality and faith practice.

¹ Ayat S. Karokaro, 'Kerusakan Ekosistem Batang Toru Perparah Banjir Dan Longsor', Mongabay, 2025 <<https://mongabay.co.id/2025/11/28/kerusakan-ekosistem-batang-toru-perparah-banjir-dan-longsor/>>; Redaksi Ekuatorial, 'Banjir Dan Longsor Di Sumatra: Krisis Ekologis Akibat Kerusakan Hutan Dan Gagalnya Tata Kelola Lingkungan', Ekuatorial, 2025 <<https://www.ekuatorial.com/2025/12/banjir-dan-longsor-di-sumatra-krisis-ekologis-akibat-kerusakan-hutan/>> [accessed 26 January 2026]; Walhi Sumatera Utara, 'Rilis Pers: Bencana Akibat Rusaknya Ekosistem Batang Toru (Harangan Tapanuli)', WALHI Sumatera Utara, 2025 <<https://walhisumut.or.id/rilis-pers-bencana-akibat-rusaknya-ekosistem-batang-toru-harangan-tapanuli/>> [accessed 27 January 2026].

² See, Roy Charly Sipahutar, 'Kajian Ekoteologis Tentang Konsep Tanah Dalam Perjanjian Lama Dan Implikasinya Bagi Pemeliharaan Tanah', *BIA': Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen Kontekstual*, 2.2 (2019), 166–78 <<https://doi.org/10.34307/b.v2i2.95>>.

In the realm of global theology, ecotheology has attempted to critique this anthropocentric paradigm, particularly through the concept of stewardship based on the development of ecological hermeneutics. This approach rereads Scripture in light of the earth's suffering to correct overly human-centered readings. However, in our opinion, most ecotheological works still maintain a hierarchical, relational framework.

A survey of ecotheological literature in Indonesia reveals a clear gap: the discourse of ecological stewardship generally still positions nature as an object that must be "managed," "protected," or "saved" by humans for the sake of the sustainability of human life and that of future generations. Previous studies such as those by Johnson Leese and critical articulations of local theology by Andar Pasaribu et al. emphasize the importance of rereading the *imago Dei*, but their reconstruction often fails at improving the moral ethics of stewardship, rather than dismantling the ontological status of nature.³ In other words, the stewardship paradigm, although corrective, still leaves behind a logic of domination: humans as stewards, nature as God's asset entrusted to be managed.

In contrast, interdisciplinary studies on friendship offer ethical-philosophical categories that emphasize reciprocity, equality, and existential interconnectedness. Discourse on the theme of theological friendship in Indonesia has so far been almost exclusively linked to horizontal relations between humans. Theological researchers such as Yohanes Krismantyo Susanta, Besly Yermy Messakh, Paul Richard Renwarin, and Fredy Simanjuntak et al. have explored the spirituality of friendship in the pastoral, ecumenical, and postmodern mission realms, but its scope has not been expanded as a paradigm for the cosmic relationship between humans and nature.⁴

This reality demonstrates a fundamental gap in the study of ecotheology, namely, where two equally rich paradigms, ecotheology and friendship, have not yet been constructively reconciled. In fact, Toba Batak cosmology offers a significant conceptual bridge. In the Toba Batak perspective, nature is understood not as a passive entity or object of exploitation, but as a "cosmic partner" in a harmonious relationship between humans, the land, ancestors, and *Mulajadi Nabolon*. This relationship affirms a communal and sacred balance of life, where humans are part of the cosmic network, not its center or sole ruler.

Ironically, although critical discourse on anthropocentrism has flourished in global theology, serious and in-depth dialogue with Toba Batak cosmology has been minimal. Yet, studies of ecotheological context have emphasized the importance of a contextual reading of the ecological crisis.⁵ In this regard, the ecological crisis of Batak Land is a real, urgent, and irresistible locus theologicus. This ecological crisis demands the development of an

³ Cf. J.J. Johnson Leese, 'Ecofaith: Reading Scripture in an Era of Ecological Crisis', *Religions*, 10.3 (2019), pp. 1–13, doi:10.3390/rel10030154; Andar G. Pasaribu, Roy C.H.P. Sipahutar, and Eduward H. Hutabarat, 'Imago Dei and Ecology: Rereading Genesis 1:26–28 from the Perspective of Toba Batak in the Ecological Struggle in Tapanuli, Indonesia', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 43.1–7 (2022).

⁴ The theme of friendship is most commonly associated with interpersonal relationships. See, for example, Yohanes Krismantyo Susanta, "Menjadi Sesama Manusia" Persahabatan Sebagai Tema Teologis Dan Implikasinya Bagi Kehidupan Bergereja', *DUNAMIS: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristiani*, 2.2 (2018), p. 103, doi:10.30648/dun.v2i2.169; Besly Yermy Tungaoly Messakh, "Menjadi Sahabat bagi Sesama: Memaknai Relasi Persahabatan dalam Pelayanan Pastoral," *Gema Teologi: Jurnal Teologi Kontekstual dan Filsafat Keilahian*, 2020; Paul Richard Renwarin, "Menuju Suatu Teologi Persahabatan," *Fides et Ratio: Jurnal Teologi Kontekstual*, 2019; Fredy Simanjuntak, Jammes Juneidy Takaliuang, and Budin Nurung, "Merengkuh Spiritualitas Persahabatan Ekumenis: Sebuah Refleksi Paradigma Misi Gereja Posmodern," *Jurnal Teologi Gracia Deo*, 2022.

⁵ Lihat, Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), p. 139.

ecotheology that is truly rooted in local experience and cultural wisdom, not merely an abstract conceptual critique that views the realities of community life from afar.

Departing from this gap, Toba Batak friendship ecotheology is proposed as an effort to fill the fundamental theological gap. In this paradigm, nature is no longer understood as an object of stewardship, but as a companion of life in the community created by God. This article argues that Toba Batak ecotheology of friendship goes beyond anthropocentrism by affirming human-nature relations that are equal, interdependent, and mutually sustaining life. This approach provides a contextual and transformative ethical and spiritual basis for the church in responding to the ecological crisis in Batak Land. This article is organized into three main parts: first, a critique of anthropocentrism in Christian theology; second, the ecotheological construction of Toba Batak friendship; and third, the practical implications for the church in Indonesia.

METHOD

This article uses a qualitative-theological approach with contextual theology methods. Specifically, this research draws on the anthropological model developed by Stephen B. Bevans.⁶ In theological methodology, the use of anthropological models is sometimes criticized by social scientists for being too distant from empirical field research. However, within the framework of contextual theology, this model justifies the culture, oral traditions, and lived experiences of a community as legitimate locus theologicus through which God reveals Himself historically. This approach is valid for exploring and articulating the truth of the Christian faith from within local cultural value structures without imposing speculative Western theological categories.

The research was conducted through a literature study of ecotheology literature, the philosophy of friendship, as well as anthropological and theological studies on Batak Toba cosmology. The data analysis process was carried out hermeneutically-critically through three stages of continuous horizon interaction: Selection and categorization of local texts, Deconstructive Criticism of Ecotheology Literature (sorting and examining the internal boundaries of stewardship theology works to map where the asymmetry of subject-object relations that still persist), and Constructive Synthesis which critically brings together the horizon of context, the horizon of Batak Toba cosmology, and the horizon of the biblical doctrine of creation to give birth to a new concept, namely the ecotheology of cosmic friendship.

As a contextual theologian shaped by the cultural environment of the Toba Batak people, the author adopts an insider perspective, maintaining both emotional and spiritual proximity to the ecological crisis affecting the Tapanuli region. Notwithstanding this positionality, the present study is based exclusively on documentary research and critical textual analysis, and does not employ primary ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews or long-term participant observation among contemporary Indigenous communities. This methodological limitation is acknowledged transparently. Nevertheless, a close and critical reading of the Toba Batak oral tradition offers a robust basis for reconstructing the community's ontological imagination of nature. As a repository of collective memory, cosmological understanding, and inherited cultural wisdom, oral tradition provides valuable access to the ways in which the Toba Batak people have historically conceptualized the relationship between humanity, the natural environment, and the sacred order of existence.

⁶ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), pp. 54–69.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Anthropocentric assumptions remain deeply embedded within Christian theological thought, particularly through the stewardship paradigm that has historically functioned as a dominant interpretive framework for understanding humanity's relationship with the natural world. Despite significant ethical refinements and ecological reinterpretations, this study argues that the stewardship model continues to be constrained by an internal asymmetry that privileges human agency over the wider community of creation. In light of this limitation, the following discussion critically interrogates the theological boundaries of stewardship while exploring the possibility of a more comprehensive relational paradigm. Such a paradigm opens new avenues for reimagining human–earth relations beyond hierarchical structures and instrumental rationality, toward a framework characterized by reciprocity, relational equality, and dialogical participation within the broader ecological community.

Beyond Stewardship: Critiquing Anthropocentrism in Christian Ecological Thought

Within contemporary Christian theological discourse, critiques of anthropocentrism often trace their intellectual roots to the influential work of Lynn White Jr., who contended that the Western Christian tradition bears partial responsibility for the emergence of the modern ecological crisis. White argued that dominant interpretations of the creation mandate, particularly those derived from Genesis 1, have historically privileged human supremacy and dominion over the natural world. By positioning humanity as the central and sovereign actor within creation, such interpretations have fostered an anthropocentric worldview that provides theological justification for the instrumentalization and exploitation of nature. From this perspective, the ecological crisis is not merely a consequence of technological advancement or economic expansion, but is also deeply intertwined with the theological and cultural paradigms that have shaped human attitudes toward the more-than-human world.⁷ This critique subsequently emerged as a significant point of departure for the development of ecological theology, prompting churches and theologians to critically reassess the relationship between humanity and the natural world within the framework of Christian faith. By exposing the ecological implications of anthropocentric interpretations of Scripture, it stimulated renewed theological reflection on creation, human responsibility, and the moral foundations of environmental stewardship. Consequently, ecological theology has increasingly sought to articulate alternative theological paradigms that emphasize interconnectedness, mutuality, and the intrinsic value of the non-human creation.

Over the past six decades, White's argument has undergone extensive waves of criticism, revision, and defense within the field of environmental theology. Although many contemporary biblical scholars have convincingly demonstrated that the Hebrew terms *radah* (to rule) and *kabash* (to subdue) in Genesis 1 do not imply tyrannical exploitation, White's thesis continues to be acknowledged for its sociological validity. Specifically, it highlights how institutional Christianity has historically adopted a mechanistic and anthropocentric worldview that regards nature primarily as a stage upon which human salvation unfolds.

It is important to emphasize that critiques of anthropocentrism are not confined to Western theological discourse. Asian and other non-Western theologians have long articulated similar concerns. They argue that colonial forms of creation theology have often alienated local communities from their sacred lands, neglected the organic interconnectedness embodied in indigenous ways of life, and legitimized capitalist extraction under the guise of fulfilling

⁷ Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science*, 155.3767 (1967), 1203–7 <<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>>.

humanity's divine mandate over the earth. From this perspective, the ecological crisis cannot be understood merely as a technological or economic problem; it is also deeply rooted in theological and cultural paradigms that have shaped human relationships with the natural world.

In response to these concerns, the paradigm of stewardship emerged, portraying human beings as God's stewards entrusted with the responsibility of caring for and preserving creation. Douglas John Hall developed this paradigm as an expression of humble and modest service, emphasizing humanity's vocation to serve rather than dominate the created order. Nevertheless, critical assessments have revealed that Hall's stewardship model continues to retain an asymmetrical structure. Human beings remain the primary moral subjects, while the rest of creation is positioned as a passive object of care. Consequently, despite its corrective intention toward exploitative anthropocentrism, the stewardship paradigm has been criticized for failing to fully overcome the hierarchical distinction between humanity and the non-human world.⁸

Leading contemporary ecological theologians have made significant efforts to move beyond the limitations of the stewardship paradigm. Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that stewardship, despite its ecological intentions, continues to preserve a hierarchical and patriarchal bias that mechanistically separates humanity from the earth. She calls for a convergence between ecofeminist spirituality and the restoration of the communal relationships that characterize the created order. Similarly, Elizabeth A. Johnson broadens the horizon of creation theology by bringing the Trinitarian love of God into dialogue with Darwinian evolutionary theory. Johnson contends that all living beings are fellow companions on a shared pilgrimage of existence, each possessing intrinsic value before God regardless of their instrumental usefulness to humanity. In this perspective, creation is not merely a collection of resources designated for human benefit, but rather a community of life sustained by God's ongoing creative and redemptive presence.⁹

A similar limitation, albeit in a more nuanced form, can also be discerned within the creation theology of prominent theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann. Through his seminal work, *God in Creation*, Moltmann introduced a significant theological advance by articulating the concept of *cosmic perichoresis*, a Trinitarian vision that emphasizes God's indwelling presence within creation through the Spirit and affirms that the entire cosmos is bound together in a sacred web of interrelatedness. In this framework, creation is understood not as an external object standing apart from God, but as a dynamic sphere permeated by divine presence and sustained through the relational communion of the Triune God.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the internal limitations of Moltmann's framework become apparent when he moves from Trinitarian ontology to the practical sphere of ethical and anthropological reflection. In articulating the praxis of human faith, Moltmann continues to assign humanity the role of a "mediator" of cosmic consciousness or a priest of creation, entrusted with an asymmetrical ethical responsibility toward the natural world. Although his theology significantly deepens the relational understanding of creation, it does not fully transcend the privileged moral status accorded to human beings.

⁸ Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986).

⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985).

This critique reaches its most explicit formulation in the work of the South African theologian Ernst Conradie. Conradie directly engages the discourse of beyond stewardship, arguing that the metaphor of the steward has become increasingly inadequate for contemporary ecological theology. In his view, the stewardship model portrays human beings as external and elitist managers who stand apart from the ecosystems of which they are in fact an integral part. Such a metaphor, he contends, perpetuates the illusion of human exceptionalism and fails to acknowledge the profound ecological embeddedness and interdependence that characterize all forms of life within the Earth community.¹¹

The concept of stewardship is vulnerable to legitimizing managerial arrogance in humanity's relationship with nature. Beyond the boundaries of institutional theology, Robin Wall Kimmerer offers a perspective rooted in Indigenous wisdom that rejects the language of managing the earth as an asset. Kimmerer proposes instead the language of reciprocity, in which nature is understood as a gift-giving subject that calls for fidelity, respect, and mutual friendship from human beings.¹²

This critique serves as an entry point into a conceptual gap: when responsibility operates only in one direction (from rational human beings toward a suffering natural world), nature remains deprived of its agency as a dialogical subject within the community of creation. Nature is cared for because it is regarded as "God's possession" (nature as an entrusted asset), rather than because it possesses its own existential dignity as a fellow subject within creation. This paradigm calls for a fundamental shift toward an understanding of reciprocal and egalitarian relationships.

Thus, the stewardship paradigm, even in its most reflective form, continues to retain anthropocentric limitations. Nature is more often understood as something to be cared for or managed, rather than as a partner present within an equal ethical and spiritual relationship. Consequently, the critique of anthropocentrism calls for a more fundamental transformation that involves not merely an ethical adjustment, but a shift in the way the relationship between humanity and creation is understood. This shift points toward an understanding of reciprocity, in which creation is recognized as a fellow member within the community of life. In this context, the paradigm of friendship may be considered a promising theological category for reimagining the relationship between humanity and nature in a non-hierarchical, relational, and ethical manner.

Toward a Batak Toba Eco-Theology of Friendship

Batak Toba Eco-Theology of Friendship fundamentally seeks to understand the relationship between humanity and nature in a way that moves beyond the concept of stewardship. If human beings have traditionally been understood as "managers" of creation who receive a divine mandate to care for it, the post-stewardship approach invites us to ask a deeper question: how should we understand our existence together with the world? Within this framework, the ecological crisis is not merely a matter of insufficient moral responsibility, but also a matter of worldview. The problem lies in how human beings perceive themselves – whether as rulers who govern and manage, or as members of an interconnected web of life.

Within the post-stewardship paradigm, ecological responsibility does not arise from humanity's position as the manager of creation who receives a mandate to govern and care for the world. Rather, it emerges from an awareness of the ontological kinship between human

¹¹ Ernst M Conradie, 'Beyond Stewardship: Options for a Christian Ecology', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 100 (1998), 44–58.

¹² Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

beings and the land, water, and all living creatures that have long existed within the cosmic order. Whereas the stewardship approach remains grounded in the assumption that human beings are the primary moral subjects responsible for the objects of creation, the post-stewardship paradigm shifts the foundation of this relationship more fundamentally. Human beings are no longer understood as stewards standing before creation, but as members of the community of creation who live within a network of interdependent relationships. Within this horizon, nature is not treated as an entrusted possession to be managed for human sustainability, but as a fellow participant sharing a common origin, a shared habitat, and a common future.

This difference has direct implications for the way ecological ethics is formulated. Ethics within the stewardship paradigm tends to be normative and instructive in nature: human beings are required to care for the natural world because they have received a divine mandate. By contrast, ecological ethics within the post-stewardship paradigm is not an ethics of obligation imposed from outside, but an ethics of relational fidelity arising from a pre-existing ontological connectedness. Responsibility toward the land and water is understood not as a moral choice open to negotiation, but as a consequence of kinship relations that precede human rational will. Within this framework, the destruction of nature is not merely an ethical failure or a violation of norms, but a betrayal of relationships – of the land as a cosmic relative, of ancestral generations, and of generations yet to come.

The practical expression of the post-stewardship paradigm is manifested in a transformed mode of human existence within the world. The relationship between humanity and creation is no longer framed by the language of management and control, but by the language of fidelity, respect, and shared existence. The care of land and water is understood not as a technical responsibility or a supplementary ethical commitment, but as a practice of faithfulness to the community of life that sustains and constitutes human existence itself. In this sense, the post-stewardship paradigm does not negate ecological responsibility; rather, it reconfigures and radicalizes its foundations. Responsibility is no longer grounded in the presumed moral superiority of human beings, but in the recognition that humanity exists within and through its participation in the wider community of creation. Ecological ethics, therefore, does not stand apart from ontology as an externally imposed moral framework; rather, it emerges from ontology itself as an expression of fidelity to the relationships that constitute, sustain, and make possible the flourishing of life.

Table 1 illustrates the paradigm shift from stewardship to post-stewardship. Within the stewardship approach, human beings are understood as stewards who receive a divine mandate to manage and care for nature as a trust entrusted by God. In contrast, the post-stewardship paradigm situates human beings as members of a broader community of creation, thereby understanding the relationship between humanity and nature in relational rather than merely hierarchical terms. This shift is also reflected in their respective philosophical foundations. Stewardship emphasizes ethics as the basis for human action, whereas post-stewardship begins with an ontological understanding of the interconnectedness of all creation, from which ethical responsibility subsequently emerges.

Within contemporary ecotheological discourse, the world is increasingly understood not as a reality detached from God, but as one profoundly interconnected with the divine presence. Accordingly, it is frequently portrayed as the “body” through which the intimate relationship between God and creation is disclosed and made manifest.¹³ The universe is not

¹³ This concept was first articulated by Sallie McFague, who proposed the metaphor of the universe as the body of God rather than as a creation existing external to God. Accordingly, the entirety of cosmic reality is

understood as something existing outside of God, but as a concrete manifestation of the divine presence. Consequently, environmental degradation constitutes a wound within the communal web of relationships that binds living beings to their Creator. Within this perspective, ecological destruction is not merely a matter of moral transgression; it is also a rupture in the relational fabric that sustains life itself.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Stewardship and Post-Stewardship Paradigms

Aspect	Stewardship	Post-Stewardship
Human Position	Human beings as stewards of creation	Human beings as fellow creatures within the community of creation
View of Nature	Nature as a trust entrusted to human care	Nature as a cosmic kin possessing an intrinsic relationship with humanity
Philosophical Foundation	Ethics precedes ontology	Ontology precedes ethics
Meaning of Responsibility	Responsibility is understood as a moral obligation to manage and care for creation	Responsibility is understood as relational fidelity within the shared life of the entire community of creation
Relational Model	A softened subject–object relationship in which human beings manage and protect nature	A subject – subject relationship in which human beings live with, care for, and cultivate relationships with nature
Language Employed	Managing, protecting, preserving	Fidelity, caring, coexisting, relating

At the same time, ecological hermeneutics affirms that the earth is not merely a backdrop to the story of salvation. Rather, it possesses intrinsic value and ought to be regarded as an integral member of the community of life. Accordingly, the concepts of Earth community and Earth justice invite a critical reassessment of theological interpretations that have been excessively anthropocentric, while opening space for a more inclusive understanding of the whole created order.

However, within the context of Batak Land, more than a merely metaphorical or hermeneutical revision is required; what is needed is an ontological shift rooted in the local cosmological worldview. A re-reading of Genesis 1:26–28, commonly referred to as the creation mandate, suggests that the attribution of the *imago Dei* to humanity should no longer be interpreted as a justification for ontological superiority. The classical interpretation that positions human beings as the “crown of creation” has, in fact, served as one of the theological foundations for the formation of a paradigm of domination over nature. Within the context of Batak Land, such an interpretation has contributed to the development of an exploitative mentality that is now manifested in the degradation of Lake Toba and the destruction of surrounding forest ecosystems.

In contrast, Batak Toba cosmology offers an alternative ontological imagination, particularly through the narrative of Si Boru Deang Parujar, the celestial heroine whose role is central to the formation of the earth and the coming into being of living creatures.¹⁴ Within this

understood as a concrete manifestation of divine presence. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Fortress Press, 1993).

¹⁴ The figure is variously referred to as *Si Boru Deak Parujar*, *Deang Parujar*, or *Deak Parujar*. While multiple versions of the *Si Boru Deang Parujar* myth circulate within Batak Toba tradition, all consistently underscore her central role in the formation of the earth and the origin of earthly life. See: W.M. Hutagalung, *Pustaka Batak: Tarombo dohot Turiturian ni Bangso Batak*, Tulus Jaya, Medan, 1991, 16–24; Sitor Situmorang, *Toba Na Sae: Sejarah Lembaga Sosial Politik Abad XII-XX*, Sinar Harapan, Jakarta, 2016, 20–26; Ibrahim Gultom, *Agama Malim di Tanah Batak*, Bumi

mythic narrative, the earth, human beings, animals, and plants emerge from the same cosmic lineage. Even before the appearance of humanity, the elements of the earth had already come into being as “elder siblings,” underscoring that human beings do not occupy the center of cosmic origins. The land is therefore not merely a created entity made available for human domination, but a genealogical member of the community of life.

This ontological consciousness is not only preserved within mythic narratives but is also embodied in oral wisdom. One *umpasa* (traditional Batak Toba poetic expression) states:¹⁵ *Tano do na niula, aek do na niinum, sai diparjolo ma marsomba tu Mulajadi Nabolon* (meaning: “The land that we cultivate and the water that we drink should always be approached with reverence toward *Mulajadi Nabolon*, the Creator.”) This expression demonstrates that the relationship between human beings and the land and water is never merely technical or practical in nature. Cultivating the land is not simply an act of labor, but an activity situated within a relationship with the Divine. Land and water are not regarded as neutral objects to be used at will; rather, they are understood as gifts worthy of reverence. From the outset, ecological relationships are conceived within a sacred horizon.

The genealogical dimension of this relationship is further affirmed in the following *umpasa*: *“tano ni ompu, tano ni anak, sai diparjaga dohot diparholong”* (meaning: The land of our ancestors, the land of our children, must always be protected and cherished) The land is understood as a bond that connects generations. It is not regarded merely as private property, but as a shared inheritance linking the past, the present, and the future. Within this framework, the concept of *marpadan* (to make a covenant or solemn pledge)¹⁶ acquires particular significance within an eco-theology of friendship. The preservation of the land is understood not merely as an ecological obligation, but as an expression of fidelity to kinship bonds that extend across generations. To care for the land is simultaneously to honor one’s ancestors and to uphold responsibility toward future generations.

The principle of cosmic interdependence is likewise expressed in the following *umpama*: *“Aek do mula ni ngolu, tano do parhobasan”* (meaning: Water is the source of life, and the land is the place of growth) This expression encapsulates a fundamental understanding of interdependence: human existence is wholly dependent upon water and land. Apart from them, life cannot flourish or endure. The relationship between human beings and the land and water, therefore, is not merely instrumental in character, but reaches the ontological foundations of existence itself.

Within this horizon, the relationship between human beings and the land cannot be reduced to an instrumental one. Whenever the land is treated as an object to be managed or exploited, the relationship becomes one of objectification. Batak Toba cosmology, by contrast, presupposes a dialogical mode of relating in which the land, animals, and plants are recognized as fellow members of the cosmic community. Such a relationship is not an I-It

Aksara, Jakarta, 2010, 122; Batara Sangti Simanjuntak, *Sejarah Batak*, Karl Sianipar Company, Balige, 1978, 283–87; Anicetus B. Sinaga, *Allah Tinggi Batak Toba: Transendensi dan Imanensi*, Kanisius, Yogyakarta, 2017, 95.

¹⁵ *Umpasa* are poetic compositions and traditional verses that form an important component of Batak Toba oral tradition. Other forms of oral expression include *umpama* (proverbs and customary sayings) and *turiturian* (oral narratives or folktales). Within Batak Toba culture, such oral traditions serve as vehicles for the transmission of worldviews, religious beliefs, ethical values, and collective aspirations. See; J.C. Vergouwen, *Masyarakat Dan Hukum Adat Batak Toba* (Yogyakarta: LKis Yogyakarta, 2004), pp. 171–76.

¹⁶ The depth of meaning embodied in the concept of *marpadan* becomes particularly evident when examined within the framework of friendship, as discussed below. Roy Charly Sipahutar, ‘Konstruksi Teologi Persahabatan Kontekstual: Membaca Ulang Narasi Persahabatan Yonatan Dan Daud Dari Lensa Seorang Batak Toba’, *Indonesian Journal of Theology*, 11.1 (2023), pp. 88–109. *Marpadan* is not only the readiness to enter into a relationship, but also to open and give oneself to others.

relation governed by utilitarian concerns, but an encounter that affirms the other as a subject possessing its own intrinsic dignity and existential integrity.

Furthermore, within this cosmological framework, humanity's attachment to the land is not an ethical choice that emerges subsequently, but an awareness of a pre-existing ontological kinship. Human beings are bound before they choose to be bound. Responsibility toward the land and life is therefore not an external moral contract, but a consequence of genealogical interconnectedness that precedes rational decision-making. In this sense, ecological ethics does not stand above ontology but arises from it.

Interestingly, this ontological understanding of interconnectedness embedded within Batak Toba cosmology finds resonance in contemporary biological discourse, particularly through the concept of the holobiont. In biology, a holobiont is understood as a unit of life constituted through the symbiotic relationships among diverse organisms that live together and mutually sustain one another, such that none can be adequately understood in isolation from the others.¹⁷ This concept is not intended to replace Batak Toba cosmology; rather, it serves to reinforce, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the insight that the existence of living beings is fundamentally relational from the outset. Accordingly, the genealogical relationships among human beings, the land, water, plants, and other living creatures, as articulated in Batak Toba myths and *umpasa*, are not merely cultural metaphors. Rather, they express an ontological reality in which life is constituted through coexistence and relational interconnectedness.

It is within this horizon that the category of friendship finds its ontological depth. Ecological friendship is not merely a moral choice made by human beings, but a recognition of the reality that humanity itself exists as part of an interdependent cosmic community. Friendship, therefore, does not originate from a human desire to "do good" to nature, but from an awareness that human beings and the natural world are already bound together within a shared community of life willed by the Creator. This relational consciousness calls for a renewed interpretation of the theological foundations of human existence itself, particularly with regard to the meaning of the *imago Dei*.

The theological implications of this perspective are far-reaching. The *imago Dei* is no longer conceived exclusively as an ontological attribute unique to humanity, but rather as an expression of divine values manifested throughout the created order.¹⁸ If all creation reflects the Creator, then any ontological hierarchy between human beings and the natural world is deprived of its theological justification. The ontology that follows from this vision is one of relational interconnectedness: to be is to exist in relation.

The category of friendship provides an appropriate theological language for articulating this relational ontology. Within the Batak Toba tradition, *maraleale* refers to existential closeness, while *marpadan* denotes a steadfast commitment transmitted across generations. When these categories are extended into the ecological horizon, the relationship

¹⁷ Lynn Margulis, *Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation: Speciation and Morphogenesis*, ed. by Lynn Margulis and Rene Fester (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 2.

¹⁸ In the dialogue between Genesis 1 and the myth of *Si Boru Deang Parujar*, both narratives affirm the ontological equality of men and women as bearers of the image of God, as well as the active participation of women in the cosmogonic process. The figure of *Si Boru Deang Parujar* as the shaper of the earth and the mother of life underscores the generative relationship between women and the earth. The land is therefore not understood as a passive object, but as a living reality that gives birth to and sustains life. Roy Charly HP Sipahutar, Rinto Tampubolon, and Andar G. Pasaribu, 'Ekofeminisme Batak Toba: Pembacaan Lintas Tekstual Kejadian 1 Dan Kosmologi Si Boru Deang Parujar', *Kurios: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen*, 9.3 (2023), pp. 715–29.

between human beings and nature is no longer understood in terms of management, but as a form of cosmic friendship characterized by fidelity and mutual flourishing.

Friendship presupposes equality, faithfulness, and reciprocal responsibility. It rejects instrumentalism and extractive modes of relating. As a post-stewardship relational ontology, Batak Toba eco-theology of friendship entails anthropological, ethical, and temporal transformation. Human beings are no longer understood as the sole moral subjects responsible for inferior objects, but as relational beings who live from and with creation. Ecological responsibility arises from fidelity to relationships grounded in mutuality and equality. Through the concept of *marpadan*, ecological friendship binds present generations to those yet to come, resisting short-term orientations that undermine cosmic balance.

In light of relational philosophy, such a relationship is not one of objectification, but a dialogical relationship that recognizes the other as a subject.¹⁹ The land, animals, and plants are not conceived as an “It” to be used for human purposes, but as a “Thou” encountered within the horizon of cosmic relationship. Furthermore, humanity’s bond with the land is not a moral commitment that arises subsequently, but an awareness of a pre-existing ontological kinship.²⁰ Ecological responsibility precedes rational choice; it emerges from genealogical interconnectedness.

This paradigm is theocentric and communal in character. God is understood as the source and sustaining bond of the cosmic community, rather than as a justification for human domination over nature. All creation exists within a communion willed by the Creator. Consequently, caring for Lake Toba and the ancestral lands of the Batak people is not merely an act of environmental conservation, but a participation in fidelity to God’s community of creation.

In this way, Batak Toba eco-theology of friendship does not eliminate ecological responsibility; rather, it radicalizes it. Responsibility arises from cosmic kinship rather than from superiority. Ethics grows out of an ontology of togetherness. In the context of the ecological crisis in Batak Land, this paradigm offers a transformation in humanity’s mode of being in the world: not as managers of the earth, but as friends within God’s cosmic community.

Ecclesial Implications of an Eco-Theology of Friendship

The paradigm of Batak Toba eco-theology of friendship calls for a radical transformation of ecclesial habitus among churches in North Sumatra. Ecological conversion should not be reduced to symbolic initiatives, such as annual tree-planting campaigns, but must involve a fundamental reorientation of the theological framework that informs the Church’s mission. Within this perspective, the earth is no longer conceived merely as an environment external to human existence, but as a locus of divine presence that sustains life – a common home that has been profoundly affected by ecological degradation. Consequently, the ecological crisis cannot be understood solely as a technical or environmental problem; it also

¹⁹ Martin Buber is one of the initiators of this relational philosophy. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (T & T Clark, 1970).

²⁰ This perspective is influenced by the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas places ethics at the foundation of philosophy by arguing that the presence of the Other, revealed through the face, precedes any attempt to comprehend or master reality. He distinguishes between totality, which reduces the Other to a system of knowledge or power, and infinity, which remains irreducible and beyond all forms of conceptual containment. On this basis, Levinas contends that human beings become ethical subjects when they respond to the Other with openness, hospitality, and unconditional responsibility. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979).

represents a rupture in the network of relationships that binds together God, humanity, and the wider community of creation.

Accordingly, the protection of Lake Toba, customary forests, and water sources should not be regarded as activities peripheral to the Church's ministry, but as integral dimensions of Christian discipleship and ecclesial witness. Liturgy, catechesis, and proclamation are therefore called to cultivate an ecological consciousness that recognizes land and water not merely as the backdrop of human existence, but as members of the community of creation living in relationship with God. Such an understanding challenges the long-standing separation between personal piety and ecological responsibility. Care for creation becomes an essential expression of faithfulness to God, whose presence is revealed and mediated through the created order.

Furthermore, the Church is called to cultivate an ethic of responsibility rooted in relationality rather than in the logic of formal obligation. Within a relational framework, responsibility toward the other does not arise primarily from rational deliberation or externally imposed moral duties; rather, it emerges from the recognition of an antecedent interconnectedness that binds lives together. Such responsibility is awakened through encounter, wherein the other is disclosed not as an object of concern but as a subject with whom one already shares a common existence.

If land, forests, and water are recognized as fellow participants in the community of creation, the Church cannot remain indifferent to processes of ecological degradation. Ecological responsibility is therefore not merely a reactive response to environmental crises, but an expression of the awareness that humanity is inextricably embedded within the same web of life as the rest of creation. In this sense, ecological destruction represents not only environmental loss but also a rupture within the relational fabric that sustains the integrity of creation.

Accordingly, in situations of agrarian conflict and the exploitation of natural resources, the Church is called to stand in solidarity with life in its fullest sense – not only for the well-being of human communities, but also for the flourishing of the entire created order. Such solidarity reflects a theological commitment to the earth as a wounded community of life that calls for healing, reconciliation, and restoration rather than domination, extraction, and control.

The affirmation that ecological responsibility is an integral part of the Church's spirituality and praxis demonstrates that Christian mission can no longer be understood narrowly as an activity oriented exclusively toward human beings. If the ecological crisis affects the web of relationships among God, humanity, and the whole of creation, then the Church's mission must likewise be interpreted within the same relational horizon. Within this framework, mission is concerned not only with verbal proclamation or institutional expansion, but also with the restoration of life-giving relationships in their entirety, including the relationship with the earth as a wounded common home. Accordingly, concern for ecological justice is not an ethical addition at the margins of the Church's mission, but a concrete expression of a faith that has been reconciled with God and creation.

This understanding is consistent with the ecumenical missiological reflection that has emerged within contemporary global church discourse. The traditional concept of mission, characterized by an anthropocentric and verbalistic orientation, must be expanded within the broader framework of global ecumenical missiology as articulated in the World Council of Churches (WCC) document, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*. The document affirms that authentic Christian mission is rooted in the *Missio Dei*

(the mission of God), which seeks to restore, love, and establish justice for the whole of creation, thereby promoting the fullness of life for all).²¹

Ultimately, at the level of concrete praxis, the Church is called to embody this theology of cosmic friendship through three interrelated pillars of action:

1. Incarnational Liturgy and Catechesis: Integrating ecological oral traditions, such as *umpasa tano* (land sayings) and *umpasa aek* (water sayings), into the liturgical life of the Church, while developing catechetical instruction that forms congregants to perceive Lake Toba and customary forests not as the backdrop of worldly property, but as sacred spaces of God's presence.
2. Agrarian Advocacy and Solidarity with a Wounded Earth: Employing the Church's moral and prophetic authority to accompany Indigenous communities in agrarian conflicts, while firmly opposing extractive industrial policies that undermine the ecological integrity and carrying capacity of the *harangan* (forests) of Tapanuli. The Church must be willing to speak courageously in defense of the rights of nature as a wounded companion.
3. Cultivating a Sustainable Communal Habitus (e.g., Intergenerational *Marpadan*): Managing church-owned land and institutional assets according to principles of ecological permaculture, minimizing the institution's carbon footprint, and promoting a lifestyle of simplicity as a concrete expression of solidarity aimed at safeguarding the future of the cosmic community. The Church is called to be present not as a ruler that exploits the earth, but as a faithful friend within the household of God's creation.

CONCLUSION

The ecological crisis in Batak Land demonstrates that environmental degradation is not merely a technical or economic issue but a manifestation of a deeper rupture in the relationships among humanity, nature, and God. This study has argued that, although the stewardship paradigm has made an important contribution to ecological theology by challenging exploitative forms of domination, it remains constrained by an anthropocentric and asymmetrical relational structure that continues to position humanity as the primary moral subject in relation to creation. Through a critical engagement with Batak Toba cosmology, particularly the narrative of *Si Boru Deang Parujar* and the ecological wisdom embodied in *umpasa*, this article has shown that the Batak Toba worldview offers an alternative ontological horizon grounded in kinship, relationality, and interconnectedness. Within this framework, the relationship between humanity and nature is no longer understood in terms of management and control but in terms of friendship, mutual belonging, and shared participation in the cosmic community willed by God. Consequently, ecological responsibility is not derived from human superiority or managerial authority but from an awareness of ontological kinship that precedes rational choice and ethical obligation. On this basis, the article has proposed an eco-theology of friendship as a post-stewardship relational ontology in which nature is recognized not as an object of stewardship but as a fellow participant in the community of creation. Such an approach contributes a contextual and transformative theological framework for addressing the ecological crisis in Batak Land by reconfiguring humanity's place within creation from ruler to friend and by integrating spirituality, ethics, mission, and ecclesial praxis within a vision of faithful participation in the life of God's creation.

²¹ World Council of Churches, *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*.

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