

Ancient Eco-Theology of Resting the Land: Between Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Postcolonial Legacies in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article presents a postcolonial eco-theological study at the intersection of biblical hermeneutics, Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) literature, colonial history, and indigenous ecological knowledge in Indonesia. Rooted in the Levitical concept of land Sabbath and Jubilee (Leviticus 25), the study situates this tradition within a broader ANE framework of periodic land and debt restitution to establish land rest as a trans-cultural, ancient ecological wisdom rather than a narrow religious directive. Drawing on postcolonial analysis of Dutch-colonized Indonesia, the research examines how distinct colonial land governance regimes as the *domein verklaring* principle converged in their ecological disruption and suppression of indigenous ecological knowledge. The indigenous cosmological frameworks of Dayak communities in Indonesia which encode reciprocal and relational obligations towards land are examined in light of biblical-ANE tradition. The study also employs methodology of grounded postcolonial theological hermeneutics and archival colonial legal analysis. These findings contribute a constructive and decolonized eco-theological framework for land justice advocacy in postcolonial Indonesia, by positioning ancient land rest wisdom as a generative resource for contemporary environmental governance and indigenous rights advocacy.

Keywords: eco-theology, land, Ancient Near Eastern studies, indigenous ecological knowledge, postcolonial

INTRODUCTION

The ecological crises confronting Indonesia in the twenty-first century are not merely environmental emergencies, but rooted in theological and ethical failures with deep historical genealogies. Indonesia has lost nearly 120 million hectares of land or 62% of total land in that now has been designated as state forest without a proper land acquisition process since the colonial period.¹ A trajectory accelerated by the 1967 Basic Forestry Law, replacing a legislative inheritor of the Dutch colonial Forest Ordinance of 1927 and the *domein verklaring* (free state domain) principle of 1870, which declared all land without private title as state property available for commercial exploitation.²

These ecological crises share a common theological root, as the colonial transformation of land from a relational entity embedded in cosmic order into an instrument of unceasing productive extraction.³ Colonial powers already disrupted what multiple ancient civilizations and indigenous communities had independently recognized as an ecological principle, fundamental necessity of land rest and periodic restitution. This article argues that recovering this ancient land wisdom,

¹ Gamma Galudra and Martua T. Sirait, *A Discourse on Dutch Colonial Forest Policy and Science in Indonesia at the Beginning of the 20th Century*, (CIFOR, 2009).

² Jeffrey Neilson, "Domein Verklaring: Colonial Legal Legacies and Community Access to Land in Indonesia," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, (2020).

³ Lily S. Mendoza and George Zachariah, (eds.), *Decolonizing Ecotheology: Indigenous and Subaltern Challenge*, (Pickwick Publications, 2022).

which represented by framework in the Levitical Jubilee tradition (Lev 25) and supported by cognate Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) legal-ethical traditions, offers constructive and genuinely postcolonial resource for ecological governance in Indonesia today as a positive outcome.

The inquiry situates within the developing literature at the intersection of eco-theology, postcolonial history, and indigenous studies, while making a distinctive contribution. One of the most is a systematic integration of ANE comparative studies as a hermeneutical layer in reframing the Levitical land Sabbath. As it functioned as a codification of widely shared ancient ecological wisdom and not merely as a specific Hebrew religious directive or culturally claim. This reframing both deepens the eco-theological critique of colonial extractivism practices and strengthens the resonance with indigenous Indonesian land ethics.

Biblical and ANE Studies on Land Sabbath

Recent biblical scholarship has increasingly recognized the Jubilee tradition of Leviticus 25 as encoding what Fernandez describes as an “ecology of wholeness,” a systemic interruption of accumulation that mandates socio-environmental conversion.⁴ Furthermore, Tewu and Kampilong develop a comprehensive stewardship framework from the same text, positioning divine land ownership as a theological challenge to extractive capitalism.⁵ Both studies build on Wright's systematic treatment of divine ownership, land sabbath, and jubilee as an interrelated theological complex.⁶

From the Assyriological side, Pritchard identified the Hebrew term *deror* (liberty, Strong H1865) as cognate with the Akkadian *andurarum* (freedom, exemption), noting that periodic debt and land cancellations were attested throughout Mesopotamia from approximately 2400 BCE.⁷ Charpin's cuneiform studies have been foundational in establishing the ANE tradition as essential comparative context for interpreting Leviticus 25.⁸ Hudson's economic archaeology demonstrates that the Bronze Age Near East maintained systemic mechanisms for periodic debt cancellation and land restitution.⁹ Niesiołowski-Spanò further nuances the tradition by locating sabbatical year legislation within Second Temple political economy.¹⁰ These scholarships collectively had established the land Sabbath as a broadly shared ancient ecological conviction rather than an Israelite invention.

Eco-theology and Postcolonial Critique

Mendoza and Zachariah have argued regarding mainstream eco-theology risks potentially reproducing colonial hierarchies of knowledge and asserted subaltern perspectives that serve as epistemological correctives rather than illustrative additions.¹¹ Aruan has introduced a remarkable

⁴ M. G. Fernandez, “Leviticus 25: Towards a Common Home and an Integral Ecology,” *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 12, (2023), p. 1501.

⁵ P. S. Tewu and J. K. Kampilong, “Biblical Stewardship and Environmental Sustainability: A Scriptural Study,” *Verbum et Ecclesia*, (2026).

⁶ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, (IVP Academic, 2006).

⁷ James B. Pritchard, (ed.), *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, 1st ed., (Princeton University Press, 1958).

⁸ Dominique Charpin, *Reading and Writing in Babylon*, Translated by Jane Marie Todd, (Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁹ Michael Hudson, *...And Forgive Them Their Debts: Lending, Foreclosure and Redemption from Bronze Age Finance to the Jubilee Year*, (ISLET-Verlag, 2018).

¹⁰ Łukasz Niesiołowski-Spanò, “The Sabbatical Year Legislation and Temple Land Possession: Remarks on Socio-Economic Legislation of the Hebrew Bible during the Persian Period,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 68, nos. 5–6, (2025), pp. 514–535.

¹¹ Mendoza, *Decolonizing Ecotheology*.

postcolonial typology for Indonesian eco-theology by identifying expansionist, tribalist, and essentialist strands.¹² In a subsequent editorial, Aruan and Kim redefine eco-theology as a form of political theology in which nonhuman entities are recognized as political subjects,¹³ drawing on original Keller's foundational framework of earth as political subject.¹⁴ Maggang further develops an archipelagic eco-theology drawing on Indonesian island cosmologies.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Kwok's postcolonial feminist theology¹⁶ and Mignolo's coloniality of power¹⁷ provide more broader decolonial epistemological architecture. Notably, none of these works systematically engages the ANE context of Leviticus 25.

Colonial Land Law and Environmental History

Neilson provides a clear genealogy of how the Dutch invented the principle of *domein verklaring* as a reform of the policy of *cultuurstelsel* (forced cultivation system), where both created the structural conditions for Indonesia's ongoing land crisis¹⁸ Meanwhile, Galudra and Sirait trace the Dutch Forest Ordinance of 1927 to contemporary state forest control mechanisms,¹⁹ whose legal-historical analysis has not been subjected to theological examination in relation to Leviticus 25 or ANE land ethics, a gap the present study addresses.

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

Niko records a framework that position the forest as a living sacred entity subject to reciprocal human obligation by documenting Dayak Benawan ethnic cosmological forest governance in West Kalimantan.²⁰ Juhani analyze Manggarai land rituals as a living ecological ethics.²¹ Risamasu develops a transformative missional eco-theology from *Akit* indigenous knowledge.²² These studies document and theorize indigenous ecological practices but have not systematically compared them with the ANE-biblical tradition of land rest, another gap this article begins to address.

The Research Gap

The present article identifies four interconnected gaps in the existing literature. First, no eco-theological study has systematically incorporated ANE land ethics as a hermeneutical layer for interpreting Leviticus 25. Second, no theological study has comparatively analyzed Dutch colonial land laws as theological data. Third, no study has brought Leviticus 25, ANE land ethics, and Dayak ethnic traditions into mutual dialogue within a single framework. Fourth, the

¹² A. K. Aruan, "Postcolonial Typology: A Pedagogical Note on the Field of Ecotheology," *Religions*, vol. 15, no. 12, (2024), p. 1422.

¹³ A. K. Aruan and S. Kim, "Ecotheology Beyond Adjective: Editorial Introduction to Special Issue." *Indonesian Journal of Theology*, vol. 13, (2025), pp. 143–155.

¹⁴ Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public*, (Columbia University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ E. Maggang, "Archipelagic Ecotheology: A Theology from Indonesian Indigenous Everydayness," *Indonesian Journal of Theology*, vol. 13, no. 2, (2025), pp. 170–190.

¹⁶ Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, (Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Neilson, *Domein Verklaring*.

¹⁹ Galudra, *A Discourse on Dutch Colonial Forest Policy and Science in Indonesia*.

²⁰ N. Niko, "Dayak Benawan Indigenous Futures: Tropical Rainforest Knowledge in Kalimantan, Indonesia," *ETropic*, vol. 24, no. 1, (2025), pp. 218–239.

²¹ S. Juhani., Hendrikus, Maku., Ambros L, Edu., and Vincensius A, Gunawan, "Traditional Beliefs as an Ecotheological Force for Sustainability: Reinterpreting Mori Keraéng amid the Climate Crisis," *Jurnal Studi Agama dan Masyarakat*, vol. 21, no. 2, (2025), pp. 67–76.

²² M. Risamasu, "From Marginalisation to Mission: Akit's Indigenous Ecological Knowledge for Transformational Ecotheology," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, vol. 81, no. 1, (2025), p. 10076.

constructive eco-theological implications of this analysis remain undeveloped, particularly for Indonesian postcolonial environmental governance context.

METHOD

This study employs investigate a postcolonial theological hermeneutics, integrating qualitative archival research, and biblical-ANE exegesis. The design is structured across three interconnected analytical channels.

Textual and Exegetical Analysis

Close interpretation of Leviticus 25 is conducted using historical-grammatical exegesis, ecological hermeneutics, and ANE comparative analysis. Primary ANE sources include the Code of Hammurabi, selected Sumerian *amargi* (return to mother) inscriptions, Babylonian *misharum* edicts, and Assyrian *andurarum* documents, accessed through the critical editions of Pritchard and Hudson. Intertextual analysis extends to cognate Hebrew Bible passages including Exodus 23:10-12, Deuteronomy 15, Leviticus 26, and Isaiah 61.

Archival Colonial Legal Analysis

Colonial land legislation is examined through legal discourse analysis. Dutch colonial materials include the Agrarian Act (1870), Forest Ordinance (1927), *domein verklaring* principle, Basic Agrarian Law (1960), and Basic Forestry Law (1967) collected from primary archival National Archives of Indonesia and related journals.

Comparative Theological Hermeneutics

The overarching analytical method is postcolonial theological hermeneutics, in which every source type of ANE and biblical text, colonial legislation, and indigenous practice is examined in relation to the others for mutual illumination and correction. This approach follows comparative theology,²³ which stated gaining insight through difference, and enabling each tradition to pose questions that the others cannot resolve independently. Meanwhile, ANE comparative analysis adheres to the methodological caution²⁴ by recognizing any structural parallels without presuming direct cultural borrowing, while attending to both similarities and significant differences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

ANE Comparative Theology

The primary theoretical layer situates Leviticus 25 within the cognitive world of the ancient Near East. Following economic archaeology of Bronze Age debt, cuneiform research, and the broader ANE biblical studies tradition.²⁵ The study manages *andurarum* and together with *misharum* (justice, equity) traditions as formative precursors to the Israelite Jubilee. Creating

²³ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

²⁴ Chavalas, *Mesopotamia and the Bible*.

²⁵ Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger, (eds.), *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations*. (Baker Academic, 2002); John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, (Baker Academic, 2006).

views on the formation of land release as a trans-cultural and trans-religious ecological practice with roots predating any particular monotheistic revelation. This ANE framework aligns closely with ecological hermeneutics, which interprets agricultural laws of the Torah as encoding a particular land ethic formed by the marginal ecology of the Levantine highlands.²⁶ It later forms another principle of moderation, diversity, and renewal that stands firm in contrast to the intensive irrigation reliant agricultural systems of Mesopotamian and Egyptian empires. Thus, the biblical land Sabbath emerged as a response to the relentless-production rationale of imperial agriculture in ANE context.

Postcolonial Theology and Decolonial Epistemology

The postcolonial theological orientation developed by Mendoza and Zachariah, that later advanced by Aruan is situated within framework of power and knowledge coloniality by Mignolo, and postcolonial feminist theology by Kwok. This framework requires attending to how colonial power structures have shaped both theological knowledge production and land governance, also privileges subaltern voices as epistemological correctives. It crucially demands examination of how colonial regimes themselves deployed theological concepts of the “civilizing mission” in the service of ecological destruction.

Political Theology of Earth

Keller together with Aruan and Kim provide a framework for reimagining eco-theology as political theology, in which nonhumans hold political status and the earth acts as active participant. Both studies have developed a significant foundation that creates a conceptual framework for bridging the ANE traditions, particularly regarding the permitting land periodic rest and contemporary political demands for land rights, ecological sovereignty, and indigenous territorial self-determination.

Colonialism

Following Cooper and Stoler work on colonial encounters between Europe and the world it dominated.²⁷ The study employs investigate colonialism to analyze how Dutch direct rule, characterized by economic centralization, *domein verklaring*, and forced cultivation, converged functionally in ecological consequences: the marginalization of indigenous ecological knowledge and the reconstitution of land as commodity.

The ANE Land Rest Tradition: Situating Leviticus 25

The principal exegetical finding is that the Levitical Jubilee (Lev 25) is best understood not as an Israelite religious innovation but as a theological crystallization of a trans-cultural ANE ecological wisdom tradition with attested roots extending to approximately 2400 BCE. The cognate relationship between the Hebrew *deror* and the Akkadian *andurarum*, which documented by Pritchard and later elaborated by Charpin establishes a shared semantic and legal field in which periodic land and debt restitution functioned as a systemic corrective to accumulation and ecological depletion.

The Mesopotamian *misharum* and *amargi* traditions revealed the underlying logic, that the land possesses an inherent right to rest and regeneration, and that human systems must be periodically corrected to restore this, which predates and transcends any particular religious tradition. Leviticus 25:23 claim, “the land is Mine” is functions within wider ANE framework as

²⁶ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²⁷ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, (University of California Press, 1997).

a theological articulation of land's non-commodity status and not serves as a uniquely Israelite territorial claim alone. It is attached in a cosmic order and obligated to honor by human legal systems.

Ecological hermeneutics from Davis provides a further interpretive layer. The distinctive land ethic encoded in Leviticus reflects the ecology of the Levant's marginal highland, where intensive extraction is categorized as an ecologically catastrophic. Thus, the biblical land Sabbath constitutes a unique indigenous ecological knowledge system of its own right, shaped by certain environmental conditions and embedded in theological cosmology.

Colonial Rupture: Dutch Land Governance Compared

The colonial analysis reveals functionally convergent regimes of land transformation. Dutch colonial governance in Indonesia operated through the *domein verklaring* of 1870 principle, which extinguished customary land tenure by declaring all land without formal private title to be state domain available for commercial exploitation. This principle, later codified in the Forest Ordinance of 1927 and partially perpetuated in the Basic Forestry Law of 1967, systematically broke the relational obligations between communities and land that had governed ecological practice for centuries.

The regimes produced theologically homologous outcomes: the reconstitution of land as productive capital that must never rest, and the suppression of indigenous ecological knowledge systems that had encoded the necessity of periodic land regeneration. This convergence constitutes what the present analysis terms a colonial theological rupture, the systematic dismantling, through legal means, of civilizational practices of ecological self-correction that multiple ancient societies had independently developed.

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge: Dayak Frameworks

Ethnographic data from Dayak Benawan communities in West Kalimantan revealed a cosmological framework that positions the tropical rainforest as a living sacred entity, not property subject to human title but a community of beings with whom human communities stand in reciprocal obligation. The forest's right to rest and regeneration is embedded in ritual practice, *adat* law, and cosmological narrative. Traditional Dayak forests governance encoded cyclical land use patterns that functioned as forms of land sabbath, the periods of deliberate non-exploitation that permitted ecological regeneration.

Dayak ethnic frameworks have been progressively marginalized by modern state policies prioritizing economic development and global market integration. This marginalization constitutes not only a human rights violation but an ecological catastrophe, as it has eliminated governance systems that encoded precisely the land rest principles identified within the broader ANE-biblical tradition.

The convergence across Leviticus 25:23 (the land belongs to God), ANE *misharum* or *andurarum* traditions (land has inherent rights to periodic restitution), and Dayak cosmological frameworks (the forest is a living sacred entity) constitutes the central constructive finding of this study. A trans-religious and trans-cultural consensus on the non-commodity status of land, also the necessity of ecological restraint that colonial extractivism systematically violated.

Discussion

ANE Integration as Hermeneutical Advance

The most significant hermeneutical contribution of this analysis is the demonstration that integrating ANE comparative studies into eco-theological depth interpretation of Leviticus 25 substantially transforms the interpretive and apologetic possibilities of the biblical tradition. Where previous eco-theological scholarship has treated the Jubilee as a specifically Israelite or Jewish-Christian resource, and therefore subject to charges of theological parochialism in pluralistic Asian contexts, the ANE framing establishes land rest as a trans-cultural ecological wisdom predating and exceeding any particular religious tradition.

This move is theologically significant in a context of religious pluralism. It allows the biblical tradition to enter dialogue with indigenous traditions and religions not as a foreign Western import but as a participant in an ancient, shared civilizational wisdom. Within this framework, colonial disruption of this shared wisdom constitutes not merely a political or economic violence, but also an attack on a trans-religious ecological heritage.

Colonial Land Law as Theological Datum

The colonial analysis shows that the Dutch land governance regimes were theologically homologous in their foundational principle: land is property; property is productive capital; capital must never rest. This principle, which the colonial regimes deployed with legal force over three centuries in Indonesia, constitutes a direct theological inversion of the ANE-biblical consensus on land's non-commodity status.

The theological significance of this finding is twofold. First, it demonstrates that colonial extractivism was not theologically neutral but operated through a specific and identifiable theological anthropology. A vision of the human as sovereign proprietor of a passive and infinitely exploitable natural world. Second, it establishes that the ecological crises in Indonesia are not merely the products of economic policy failures but of a deep theological distortion that must be named and addressed at the level of theological conviction.

Limits and Critical Considerations

The comparative identification of convergences across ANE, biblical, and indigenous traditions risks obscuring significant theological divergences. The differences that may be as theologically generative as the convergences. The ANE *misharum* traditions, for instance, operated within monarchical political theologies that cannot be straightforwardly translated into democratic governance frameworks. The Dayak ethnic frameworks are internally diverse and cannot be homogenized into a single "indigenous ecological knowledge" category.

Furthermore, the methodological caution recommended by Chavalas and Younger applies equally to comparative theology. It recognizing structural parallels across traditions without establish direct historical connection or authorize the conflation of distinct theological systems. The constructive synthesis proposed here is a dialogical proposal, not a claim of theological identity. The study's findings are also necessarily preliminary in their ethnographic dimension. The interpretations offered here represent analytical directions and hypotheses rather than fully grounded empirical conclusions.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the Levitical Jubilee tradition understood within its ANE context of trans-cultural land rest wisdom, constitutes a genuine and generative postcolonial eco-theological resource for addressing the ecological crises of Indonesia. This demonstrates that the country's colonial land governance regimes enacted a theologically coherent, although profoundly destructive by inversion of this ancient wisdom through transforming relational land into productive capital. This article has identified significant convergences between the biblical-ANE tradition and Dayak cosmological frameworks, which constitute a trans-religious consensus on the non-commodity status of land that colonial extractivism systematically dismantled.

The constructive eco-theological proposals emerging from this analysis operate at three levels. First, the study proposes the concept of "sacred land rest" as an interreligious ethical principle capable of grounding advocacy across ANE tradition, Israelite wisdom, and indigenous community contexts in Indonesia. Second, it identifies the perpetuation of colonial land governance structures in post-independence Indonesia as a continuing theological failure demanding prophetic response. Third, it suggests that restoring and revaluing indigenous ecological knowledge systems, which encoding forms of land sabbath is an ecological and a theological imperative.

Ancient civilizations across the Near East, the Mediterranean, and Asian independently developed the ecological wisdom that land must rest and that human economic systems must be periodically corrected to honor this necessity. Colonial extractivism dismantled this civilizational consensus in the service of imperial production. Recovering it in dialogue among traditions, beyond religious boundaries and across the colonial wound is the urgent theological and ecological task of our time.

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