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Ecological Warnings: Lot's Wife in Climate Change Discourses within African Church History

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Abstract

In the context of Africa's escalating climate crises, this study explores the reinterpretation of Lot's wife's narrative in African church history as a prophetic warning against environmental degradation. Using Ernst Conradie's eco-hermeneutics, it examines how this biblical story critiques exploitative practices and promotes sustainability in vulnerable communities. Through a qualitative historical-theological analysis of archival sermons and church documents, focusing on sub-Saharan African churches, the research highlights the region's disproportionate climate impacts and indigenous spiritual traditions. The findings show Lot's wife's backward glance symbolizing attachment to unsustainable systems, encouraging forward-looking stewardship. The study recommends eco-theological education, church-led reforestation, and interfaith climate justice dialogues, emphasizing the African church's potential to lead global ecological renewal by transforming warnings into hope.

Keywords: Lot's Wife, Eco-Theology, Climate Change, African Church, Environmental Stewardship

Introduction

The biblical account of Lot's wife, as detailed in Genesis 19:15-26, presents a dramatic and enduring symbol of divine judgment intertwined with human frailty, where her fateful decision to look back at the burning cities of Sodom and Gomorrah results in her instantaneous transformation into a pillar of salt (New International Version, 2011). This narrative, often interpreted through lenses of obedience, nostalgia, and moral failure, has transcended its ancient origins to become a multifaceted metaphor in modern theological discussions, particularly in the realm of eco-theology, where it serves as a stark ecological warning against humanity's reluctance to abandon destructive environmental behaviours in the face of impending catastrophe (Johnson, 2023). In the context of African church history, this story resonates profoundly amid the continent's escalating climate crises, including prolonged droughts, devastating floods, soil degradation, and the loss of biodiversity, all of which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations reliant on agriculture and natural resources for survival (Kavusa, 2022).

African theologians and church leaders, drawing from a rich indigenous spiritualities that view the earth as a sacred gift from the Creator, have increasingly repurposed Lot's wife's tale to critique unsustainable development models inherited from colonial eras and perpetuated by global capitalism, urging believers to "flee forward" toward ecological restoration rather than clinging to exploitative practices that mirror the sins of Sodom,

exploitation, greed, and disregard for the marginalized, including the non-human creation (Magesa, 2017). This reinterpretation is not merely academic but deeply practical, as Africa's churches, encompassing a diverse array of denominations from African Initiated Churches (AICs) to mainstream Protestant and Catholic bodies, play a pivotal role in community mobilization and policy advocacy (Olofinsjana, 2021).

Historically, Christianity in Africa has evolved from missionary-imposed doctrines that sometimes-justified environmental exploitation, such as land grabs for plantations, to postcolonial theologies that emphasize stewardship and justice, influenced by liberation theology and womanist perspectives that highlight the interconnectedness of human and ecological oppression (Townes, n.d.). For instance, in regions like sub-Saharan Africa, where climate change exacerbates poverty and conflict, Lot's wife's backward glance symbolizes the peril of nostalgia for fossil fuel-dependent economies or deforestation-driven agriculture, which promise short-term gains but lead to long-term devastation (Conradie, 2007).

Jesus' own exhortation in Luke 17:32 (NIV), "Remember Lot's wife", amplifies this urgency, positioning her as a timeless reminder that faith demands decisive action in times of crisis, much like the prophetic calls in contemporary African sermons that link biblical judgment to modern environmental sins (Holland, 2009). By exploring these discourses, this article aims to illuminate how African church history has woven Lot's wife's narrative into climate change conversations, fostering a theology that integrates biblical fidelity with scientific realities and cultural wisdom, ultimately advocating for a faith-driven response to one of the greatest existential threats of our time.

Furthermore, the study delves into the broader implications of this narrative for global ecotheology, noting how African perspectives enrich worldwide discussions by incorporating communal and holistic views of creation care, contrasting with more individualistic Western approaches (Sansa**,** 2023). In Nigeria, for example, where rapid urbanization and oil extraction have led to severe ecological damage in the Niger Delta, church leaders have invoked Lot's wife to warn against "looking back" to polluting industries, instead promoting renewable energy and community-led conservation (Akotom, 2025).

Similarly, in East Africa, amid the shrinking of Lake Victoria and recurrent famines, her story underscores the need for repentance from overfishing and land misuse (Edinburgh University Press, 2024). This exploration not only traces the historical evolution of these interpretations but also highlights their relevance in empowering African Christians to lead in international climate forums, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), where faith-based advocacy can bridge spiritual convictions with policy demands for equity and sustainability (Öhlmann and Stork, 2024).

Biblical Interpretation of Lot's Wife in Eco-Theology

The biblical portrayal of Lot's wife in Genesis 19:15–26 unfolds against the backdrop of divine intervention in the corrupt cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, where her family's escape is marked by a strict angelic command: "Flee for your lives! Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere in the plain!" (New International Version, 2011). Her violation of this directive, resulting in her petrification into a pillar of salt, has traditionally been viewed as an emblem of disobedience and the perils of divided loyalties, but in the burgeoning field of eco-theology, this event is reframed as a profound ecological parable warning against humanity's attachment to environmentally destructive lifestyles that invite judgment upon the earth itself (Lehrhaus, 2020).

Scholars like Wenham (1994) emphasize that Sodom's sins extended beyond moral depravity to include the exploitation of the land and resources, akin to modern practices of overconsumption and pollution that degrade ecosystems. This suggests that Lot's wife's glance backwards represents a collective human failure to embrace God's redemptive path toward sustainability. This eco-theological lens posits that her transformation into salt, a substance that can both preserve and sterilize, symbolizes the dual potential of human actions: either nurturing the earth or rendering it barren, as seen in contemporary issues like soil salinization resulting from irresponsible irrigation in arid African regions (Kavusa, 2022). With this interpretation, eco-theologians argue that Lot's wife's story aligns with broader scriptural mandates for creation care, such as the dominion stewardship in Genesis 1:28 (NIV) and the call to "till and keep" the garden in Genesis 2:15 (NIV), positioning her as a cautionary figure for ecological apostasy where nostalgia for exploitative systems hinders progress toward environmental harmony (Conradie, 2007).

In African contexts, this resonates with indigenous cosmologies that view the land as alive and interconnected with spiritual realms, allowing theologians to draw parallels between Sodom's fiery destruction and the "fires" of climate-induced wildfires or desertification sweeping across the Sahel (Magesa, 2017). For instance, the pillar of salt evokes images of the Dead Sea's hypersaline environment, a natural consequence of ecological imbalance, mirroring how human-induced climate change amplifies natural disasters in Africa, from the flooding of coastal communities in Mozambique to the drying up of rivers in Kenya (Chitando, Maseno, Conradie, and Kilonzo, 2024). Jesus' reference in Luke 17:32 (NIV) further elevates her narrative to an eschatological warning, implying that in the "days of the Son of Man," believers must not "look back" at carbon-intensive habits but pursue a kingdom-oriented ecology that prioritizes justice for the poor, who suffer most from climate impacts (Holland, 2009).

Moreover, feminist eco-theological readings add layers of depth, portraying Lot's wife not merely as a passive victim but as a symbol of gendered environmental burdens, where women in African societies often bear the responsibility for water collection and farming amid changing climates, their "backward glances" reflecting societal pressures to maintain traditional roles in unsustainable systems (Swan, 2025). This interpretation challenges patriarchal structures within both biblical texts and modern churches, advocating for inclusive eco-praxis that empowers women as agents of change (Townes, n.d). Overall, the biblical reinterpretation of Lot's wife in eco-theology transforms her from a figure of mere judgment to a prophetic voice calling for radical ecological conversion, urging African Christians to integrate faith with science in addressing the intertwined crises of spirituality and sustainability (Johnson, 2023).

Historical Context in African Church History

The integration of biblical narratives, such as Lot's wife, into ecological discourses within African church history reflects a dynamic evolution from colonial impositions to indigenous reclamations, where Christianity's encounter with Africa's diverse environments has shaped unique theological responses to environmental challenges. During the colonial period, European missionaries often imported anthropocentric views that justified resource extraction, viewing the African landscape as a frontier for exploitation in the name of "civilizing" missions, yet early African converts began subtly reinterpreting scriptures to resist such narratives, drawing on stories of divine judgment to critique land dispossession (Ayandele, 1966). Pioneers in African eco-missiology, such as Daneel, who founded the Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation (ZIRRCON) in the late 20th century, adapted Old Testament motifs to promote tree-planting rituals as acts of

repentance, implicitly linking Lot's wife's fate to the consequences of deforestation that stripped sacred groves of their spiritual and ecological significance.

In the postcolonial era, African Initiated Churches (AICs) emerged as vital spaces for eco-theological innovation, blending Christian doctrine with primal religions that emphasize harmony with nature, where Lot's wife's story served as a warning against "looking back" to colonial agricultural models that prioritized cash crops over biodiversity, leading to soil erosion and climate vulnerability (De Gruyter Brill, 2025a). For example, in South Africa during the apartheid struggle, liberation theologians like Desmond Tutu extended ecological interpretations to include social justice, viewing environmental degradation as a form of structural sin akin to Sodom's oppression, thus using Lot's wife to advocate for land reform and sustainable farming practices that heal both people and the planet (Knoetze, 2022). Womanist theologians, inspired by figures like Katie Geneva Cannon, have further historicized this narrative by highlighting how African women, historically marginalized in land ownership, embody the "pillar of salt" in their steadfast resistance to ecological injustice, transforming her story into a call for gender-inclusive environmental activism.

By the turn of the 21st century, amid accelerating climate change, African church historians and theologians like Ernst Conradie have systematically incorporated Lot's wife into broader discourses on climate justice, framing her as a symbol of the need for collective repentance from global North-driven emissions that disproportionately harm Africa, as evidenced in documents from the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) that urge "forward flight" toward renewable energies and conservation (Conradie, 2017). This historical trajectory illustrates how African Christianity has not only adapted but innovated, using biblical warnings to forge a resilient faith that addresses the continent's unique ecological histories, from the slave trade's disruption of ecosystems to modern mining's scars, positioning churches as prophetic voices in global environmental dialogues (Mwambazambi, 2014).

Climate Change Discourses in Africa

Climate change discourses in Africa, amplified by the continent's acute vulnerabilities, such as rising sea levels threatening coastal cities like Lagos and Dakar, or prolonged droughts devastating pastoral communities in the Horn of Africa, have increasingly intersected with religious narratives, where Lot's wife's story emerges as a compelling metaphor for the dangers of regressive policies that perpetuate environmental harm (Adeniran, and Roman, 2024). In these discussions, African scholars and church leaders portray her backward glance as emblematic of governments and corporations clinging to fossil fuel dependencies and large-scale agribusiness, which exacerbate greenhouse gas emissions. They urge instead a prophetic commitment to adaptation strategies, such as agroforestry and water conservation (Chitando, Maseno, Conradie, and Kilonzo, 2024). For instance, in East African church conferences, theologians draw parallels between Sodom's destruction and the melting of Mount Kilimanjaro's glaciers, using Lot's wife to mobilize youth for climate strikes and reforestation campaigns that embody a "forward-looking" faith (Knoetze, 2021).

Furthermore, Southern African discourses, influenced by the region's history of apartheid-era environmental racism, where black communities were displaced to degraded lands, reinterpret Lot's wife through lenses of eco-justice, warning against "salination" of soils from mining runoff and calling for restorative practices that heal both land and social wounds (Knoetze, 2022) Indigenous knowledge systems, integrated into AIC theologies, enrich these conversations by viewing the earth as a living entity, where Lot's wife's petrification symbolizes the spiritual death that follows ecological neglect, as seen in

Zimbabwean rituals that combine biblical readings with ancestral veneration to combat biodiversity loss (De Gruyter Brill, 2025b).

In West Africa, particularly in Nigeria, climate discourses leverage her narrative to critique oil spills in the Niger Delta, framing them as modern Sodom-like abominations that demand communal flight toward sustainable alternatives, such as solar power, with churches leading advocacy through interfaith coalitions (Akotom, 2025). In addition, youth-led movements within African churches have amplified these discourses, using social media and sermons to reinterpret Lot's wife for a digital age, emphasizing her story's relevance to urban climate adaptation in megacities like Johannesburg, where heatwaves and flooding mirror biblical judgments, and calling for policies that prioritize green infrastructure over outdated urban planning (Knoetze, 2021).

Across the continent, these discourses converge on the need for holistic theology that addresses intersectional issues, such as how climate change disproportionately affects women and children, positioning Lot's wife as a feminist icon, urging empowerment through environmental education and leadership (Swan, 2025). Ultimately, these evolving conversations underscore Africa's churches as innovators in global climate theology, blending scripture with science to foster resilience and equity in the face of existential threats (Sansa, 2022).

Implications for the African Church

The reinterpretation of Lot's wife as an ecological warning carries profound implications for the African Church, challenging it to evolve from passive observer to active steward in the fight against climate change, thereby redefining its mission in a world grappling with environmental collapse. Theologically, this narrative compels churches to adopt a more integrated view of salvation that encompasses not only human souls but the entire creation, encouraging sermons and curricula that link biblical judgment stories to contemporary crises like biodiversity loss in the Congo Basin, where deforestation rates rival historical exploitations, fostering a faith that actively combats "ecological sins" through practices like carbon fasting during Lent (De Gruyter Brill, 2025b).

Practically, it empowers AICs to leverage their grassroots networks for community-based initiatives, such as establishing "green congregations" that implement solar-powered worship spaces and organic farming cooperatives, transforming Lot's wife's warning into actionable blueprints for sustainability that address food insecurity amid erratic weather patterns (Stork and Öhlmann, 2025). Socially, the implications extend to justice advocacy, where African churches can use her story to highlight the disproportionate impacts on marginalized groups, advocating for policies that redress colonial legacies of environmental racism, such as reparations for climate-vulnerable nations at international forums like COP conferences (Öhlmann and Stork, 2024).

For women and youth, who often led household adaptations to climate shifts, this narrative implies a shift toward inclusive leadership, with churches providing training programs that empower them as eco-prophets, drawing on womanist theologies to challenge patriarchal barriers in environmental decision-making (Longhenry, n.d.). Historically, this fosters a reflective ecclesiology, where churches revisit their missionary-era complicity in resource extraction, such as rubber plantations in the Belgian Congo, and commit to reparative actions, like reforestation drives, that honour indigenous land rights (Mwambazambi, 2011).

Moreover, interfaith and ecumenical implications arise, as Lot's wife's universal warning facilitates dialogues with Muslim and traditional African spiritual leaders, creating coalitions for shared environmental goals, such as protecting sacred forests in Ghana or watersheds in Ethiopia, thereby amplifying the church's voice in national policies on renewable energy transitions (Conradie, 2017). Educationally, implications include integrating eco-theology into seminary training and equipping pastors to preach on climate resilience using biblical motifs. Economically, churches can promote ethical investments that divest from fossil fuels, modelling a "forward flight" economy that prioritizes communal well-being over profit (Chitando, 2017). Overall, these implications position the African Church as a vanguard in global eco-theology, harnessing historical wisdom to forge a future where faith and ecology converge for holistic healing.

Recommendations

1. Integrate eco-theological education into seminary curricula across African denominations, emphasizing reinterpretations of narratives like Lot's wife to equip clergy with tools for addressing climate change in sermons and community programmes.
2. Launch church-led reforestation and conservation initiatives, using Lot's wife's story as a motivational framework to mobilize congregations for practical actions like tree-planting campaigns in deforested regions.
3. Foster interfaith and ecumenical dialogues on climate justice, drawing on the narrative's universal warning to build coalitions with other religious groups for advocacy at national and international levels, such as pushing for equitable climate finance.
4. Empower women and youth through targeted environmental leadership training, reframing Lot's wife as a symbol of resilience to address gendered impacts of climate change and promote inclusive decision-making in church environmental committees.
5. Develop green congregation models that implement sustainable practices, such as solar installations and waste reduction, inspired by the call to "not look back" at polluting habits, to serve as community exemplars.

Conclusion

In synthesizing the ecological warnings embedded in Lot's wife's narrative through the lens of African church history, it becomes evident that this ancient story holds transformative power for contemporary climate change discourses, serving as a bridge between sacred scripture and the pressing realities of environmental degradation on the continent (Sansa, 2023). Her pillar of salt, standing as a silent testament to the consequences of regressive attachments, calls African Christians to a prophetic awakening, urging them to abandon the "Sodom's" of unsustainable practices, be it rampant deforestation in Central Africa, water scarcity in the Sahel, or urban pollution in megacities and embrace a forward-oriented theology that integrates faith, science, and indigenous wisdom for holistic restoration (Magesa, 2017).

This reinterpretation not only enriches global ecotheology by infusing it with African perspectives on communal stewardship but also empowers churches to lead in resilience-building, from grassroots initiatives to international advocacy, ensuring that the legacy of Lot's wife evolves from one of judgment to one of hope and action (Conradie, 2007). As Africa continues to bear the brunt of climate injustices perpetrated largely by external

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forces, the church's role in these discourses cannot be overstated, fostering a spirituality that views creation care as integral to discipleship and justice (Johnson, 2023). By heeding this biblical warning, African Christianity can inspire a global movement toward sustainability, turning potential pillars of regret into pillars of strength for future generations (Longhenry, n.d.).

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