

## Preserving Creation in Times of Conflict: A Biblical Response to Deforestation and Environmental Degradation in Nigeria's War Zones

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### Abstract

Nigeria's conflict-affected regions, particularly the Northeast, Middle Belt, and Niger Delta, have experienced severe deforestation driven by insurgency, displacement, military operations, and resource extraction. These dynamics have deepened food insecurity, accelerated biodiversity loss, and produced long-term ecological degradation across communities already burdened by violence. While environmental scholarship has documented these impacts with growing urgency, theological and eco-theological studies have insufficiently engaged the question of how biblical war legislation conceptualizes limits to environmental destruction in conflict settings. This study addresses that gap by revisiting Deuteronomy 20:19–20, examining how this ancient legal text articulates constraints on ecological harm within the context of warfare and how its ethical logic may be critically, rather than prescriptively, related to contemporary conflict-induced deforestation in Nigeria. The study employs an integrated methodological framework combining historical-critical, literary, and eco-theological approaches, further deepened by just war theory, political theology, and postcolonial critique. Findings reveal that Deuteronomy 20:19–20 functions primarily as a legal constraint on totalizing destruction, reflecting an internal tension between military necessity and resource preservation rather than a fully developed ecological ethic. Its significance for contemporary discourse lies not in direct normative transfer but in its capacity to illuminate enduring tensions between violence, governance, and environmental limitation. The study therefore reframes the passage as a dialogical resource for critical theological reflection, one that invites engagement with the moral boundaries of warfare and the sacred responsibility toward creation, without assuming direct continuity between ancient and modern contexts.

**Keywords:** conflict; creation; environmental degradation; Nigeria's war zones; preserving

### Abstrak

*Wilayah-wilayah Nigeria yang dilanda konflik, khususnya Timur Laut, Sabuk Tengah, dan Delta Niger, telah mengalami deforestasi parah akibat pemberontakan, perpindahan penduduk, operasi militer, dan eksploitasi sumber daya alam. Dinamika-dinamika ini telah memperparah ketidakamanan pangan, mempercepat hilangnya keanekaragaman hayati, dan menghasilkan degradasi ekologis jangka panjang di tengah komunitas yang sudah terbebani oleh kekerasan. Meskipun kajian lingkungan hidup telah mendokumentasikan dampak-dampak tersebut dengan urgensi yang semakin meningkat, studi teologis dan eko-teologis belum cukup mengkaji pertanyaan tentang bagaimana perundang-undangan perang dalam Alkitab mengonseptualisasikan batasan terhadap kerusakan lingkungan dalam situasi konflik. Penelitian ini mengisi kesenjangan tersebut dengan mengkaji ulang Ulangan 20:19–20, menelaah bagaimana teks hukum kuno ini mengartikulasikan pembatasan terhadap kerusakan ekologis dalam konteks peperangan dan bagaimana logika etisnya dapat dikaitkan secara kritis, bukan preskriptif, dengan deforestasi akibat konflik kontemporer di Nigeria. Penelitian ini menggunakan kerangka metodologis terpadu yang menggabungkan pendekatan historis-kritis, sastra, dan eko-teologis, yang diperdalam lebih lanjut oleh teori perang yang adil, teologi politik, dan kritik poskolonial. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa Ulangan 20:19–20 berfungsi terutama sebagai pembatas hukum terhadap pemusnahan total, mencerminkan ketegangan internal antara keniscayaan militer dan pelestarian sumber daya, ketimbang sebagai etika ekologis yang sepenuhnya berkembang. Signifikansinya bagi wacana kontemporer terletak bukan pada transfer normatif secara langsung, melainkan pada*

kemampuannya menerangi ketegangan abadi antara kekerasan, tata kelola, dan pembatasan lingkungan. Penelitian ini karenanya merumuskan ulang perikop tersebut sebagai sumber dialogis untuk refleksi teologis kritis, yang mengundang keterlibatan dengan batas-batas moral peperangan dan tanggung jawab sakral terhadap ciptaan, tanpa mengandaikan kesinambungan langsung antara konteks kuno dan modern.

**Kata Kunci:** konflik; ciptaan; degradasi lingkungan; zona perang Nigeria; pelestarian

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, deforestation has emerged as one of the most pressing environmental crises confronting Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon is driven by a convergence of factors that include agricultural expansion, commercial logging, infrastructural development, extractive industries, and, increasingly, armed conflict.<sup>2</sup> According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), sub-Saharan Africa accounted for a significant share of the nearly 100 million hectares of global forest loss between 2000 and 2020, with Nigeria among the most affected countries.<sup>3</sup>

Reports from the Federal Ministry of Environment indicate that Nigeria loses approximately 400,000 hectares of forest annually due to agricultural expansion, unsustainable logging, and urbanisation (Federal Ministry of Environment).<sup>4</sup> Satellite-based assessments by the University of Maryland's GLAD laboratory, available through Global Forest Watch, record a cumulative tree cover loss of approximately 1.44 million hectares in Nigeria between 2001 and 2024, representing 14.3% of the country's tree cover baseline recorded in 2000.<sup>5</sup> Forest depletion is especially severe in conflict-affected regions, including the Northeast, where insurgency and displacement increase dependence on forest resources; the Niger Delta, where militancy and oil exploitation drive environmental degradation; and parts of the Middle Belt, where recurrent herder-farmer conflicts accelerate land clearing.<sup>6</sup> These patterns demonstrate how insecurity and socio-economic pressures intensify deforestation in Nigeria. In these regions, warfare and militarization have intensified ecological destruction as forests are cleared for military operations, temporary settlements, energy crisis and firewood dependency among displaced populations. Although trees and ecosystems are non-belligerent entities, they frequently become silent casualties in struggles for political power, territorial control, and security.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the gravity of this intersection between armed conflict and environmental degradation, it remains insufficiently explored in both Nigerian environmental policy discourse and theological scholarship. While recent decades have witnessed a growing body of

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<sup>1</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020* (Rome: FAO, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8753en>, 10-12.

<sup>2</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *The State of the World's Forests 2022* (Rome: FAO, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb9360en>, 34-36.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Ministry of Environment, *National Forest Policy for Nigeria* (Abuja: Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019), 7-9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pp.7-9.

<sup>5</sup> World Resources Institute, "Nigeria Deforestation Rates and Statistics," *Global Forest Watch*, last modified 2026, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/NGA/?map=eyJjYW5Cb3VuZCI6dHJ1ZX0%3D>.

<sup>6</sup> World Bank, *Climate Risk Country Profile: Nigeria* (Washington DC: World Bank Group, 2021), 15-17.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 193-196.

biblical and theological reflection on creation care, eco-justice, and environmental stewardship, relatively little attention has been paid to the ethical demands of ecological responsibility during wartime. Particularly neglected is sustained engagement with Deuteronomy 20:19–20, a legal-ethical text in which Yahweh commands the Israelites not to destroy fruit-bearing trees during siege warfare. This injunction is striking not only because it places moral limits on military conduct but also because it implicitly affirms the intrinsic value of non-human life and the long-term sustainability of the land, even in contexts of violent human conflict.<sup>8</sup>

This study revisits Deuteronomy 20:19–20 within eco-theological and environmental ethics discourse by focusing on a more precise problem: the regulation of ecological destruction within biblical war law and its possible relevance to conflict-induced deforestation in Nigeria. Rather than claiming originality broadly, it refines existing scholarship by examining the tension between military necessity and ecological restraint in a specific legal text. The research problem is therefore narrowly framed: how does Deuteronomy 20:19–20 articulate limits to environmental destruction in warfare, and how might this be critically related (rather than prescriptively applied) to contemporary Nigerian conflict contexts? The study does not assume the text's normative relevance but first interrogates its ethical logic within its historical and literary setting.

To deepen analysis, the study engages just war theory (restraint and proportionality), political theology (law, power, and divine command), and postcolonial critique (contextual sensitivity and epistemic caution). It thus asks what ethical principles underlie the text and under what conditions, if any, they may contribute to contemporary environmental discourse in conflict-affected regions. This study investigates the theological, ecological, and ethical dimensions of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 in relation to conflict-induced deforestation in Nigeria through a clearly defined and integrated methodological framework. It combines historical-critical, literary, and eco-theological approaches, each applied as a distinct analytical procedure.

The historical-critical method reconstructs the socio-historical and legal context of ancient Israel using source, form, and redaction criticism, thereby clarifying the background and intent of Deuteronomic war legislation. The literary method undertakes a close reading of the text in its final form, analyzing its structure, rhetoric, and thematic development, particularly regarding human–land relations. These are complemented by an eco-theological hermeneutic that interprets the text's ecological and ethical significance within a broader theological framework. The study also engages interdisciplinary insights from environmental science and conflict-related deforestation data to situate the biblical analysis within Nigeria's contemporary ecological realities, ensuring both contextual grounding and analytical coherence.<sup>9</sup>

By foregrounding a rarely examined text in ecological theology and situating it within Nigeria's context of armed conflict, this study offers a fresh theological and ethical resource for

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<sup>8</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 121-128.

<sup>9</sup> Ernst M. Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for Further Research* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2006), 45-67.

addressing the environmental costs of war. It challenges theologians, policymakers, and faith-based environmental advocates to reconsider the moral boundaries of warfare and to recover a sacred responsibility toward creation, even amid violence. Deuteronomy 20:19–20 thus emerges not merely as an ancient legal prescription but as a prophetic witness to the enduring value of creation and the necessity of ecological restraint in all human endeavors.

### **Eco-theology in African Scholarship**

Eco-theology has gained increasing attention within African theological scholarship as scholars respond to the continent's ecological crises, including deforestation, land degradation, and climate change. African eco-theology explores the relationship between God, humanity, and the natural environment, emphasizing that environmental stewardship is both a moral and theological responsibility. Unlike purely Western ecological discourse, African eco-theology often integrates biblical interpretation with indigenous ecological knowledge, which traditionally recognizes land, forests, and water bodies as sacred elements within communal life.<sup>10</sup>

One of the foundational voices in African ecological theology is Jesse N. K. Mugambi, whose framework of reconstruction emphasizes restoring harmonious relationships between humanity, society, and the environment. Mugambi argues that ecological responsibility must form part of the broader task of rebuilding African societies after colonialism and socio-economic crises, situating environmental stewardship within the pursuit of justice, peace, and sustainable development.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Laurenti Magesa highlights the ecological values embedded in African indigenous religious traditions. He notes that traditional African ethical systems often regarded nature as a sacred trust entrusted to the community by the Creator, offering valuable resources for contemporary Christian ecological ethics.<sup>12</sup>

Musa W. Dube, through postcolonial biblical hermeneutics, addresses the intersection of ecological exploitation, colonialism, and social injustice. She argues that ecological destruction in Africa is tied to historical patterns of domination, and calls for contextual biblical interpretation that recognizes the interconnected suffering of marginalized communities and the natural environment.<sup>13</sup> Tinyiko S. Maluleke emphasizes that African theology must include environmental concerns alongside issues such as poverty, injustice, and political transformation. He contends that the ecological crisis in Africa cannot be separated from socio-economic structures that perpetuate inequality and environmental degradation.<sup>14</sup>

Ernst M. Conradie has extensively shaped African eco-theological discourse, arguing that Christian theology must confront environmental destruction through a doctrine of creation that stresses ecological responsibility and the integrity of the earth as part of God's

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<sup>10</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 83-86.

<sup>11</sup> Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995), 46-50.

<sup>12</sup> Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 83-86.

<sup>13</sup> Musa W. Dube and Musa Dube Shomanah, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Missouri: Chalice Press, 2012), 118-122.

<sup>14</sup> Tinyiko Maluleke, "Black and African Theologies in Search of Comprehensive Environmental Justice," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 167 (2020): 5–19.

redemptive purposes.<sup>15</sup> Global ecotheological voices, such as Leonardo Boff, have also influenced African scholarship. Boff integrates liberation theology with ecological ethics, arguing that concern for the poor must be inseparable from concern for the earth—a notion that resonates strongly in African contexts where environmental degradation disproportionately affects vulnerable populations.<sup>16</sup>

These perspectives find further resonance in more recent biblical scholarship. Warwer et al. demonstrate that deforestation is not merely an ecological issue but a theological crisis requiring Christian reflection and responsibility, examining forest loss through a biblical lens in ways that resonate directly with the methodological approach of the present study, which similarly engages Deuteronomy as an ecological-legal text requiring hermeneutical care.<sup>17</sup> Sihalo and Novalina further argue from the creation narrative that Christian presence must bring order to the natural world, and that obedience to the creation mandate constitutes an act of eschatological faithfulness, a theological logic that undergirds the present study's concern with ecological restraint in conditions of conflict.<sup>18</sup>

African eco-theological scholarship has extensively addressed climate change, land ethics, indigenous ecological knowledge, and environmental justice, but has given limited attention to ecological regulation within biblical war legislation. This leaves under-examined the way scriptural texts frame environmental limits in contexts of violence and military necessity. Within this narrower focus, Deuteronomy 20:19–20 is not treated as a direct ethical solution but as a case for analysing how biblical law negotiates restraint and destruction during warfare. Engaging the passage in this way refines African eco-theological discourse by extending its analytical scope to include war-related ecological constraints while maintaining critical distance from direct normative application.

### **Critical Literary and Contextual Analysis of Deuteronomy 20:19–20**

Deuteronomy 20:19–20 occupies a distinctive place within the Deuteronomic war corpus, introducing an ecological restriction within a legal discourse primarily concerned with military conduct. While the passage is frequently read as an ethical limitation on environmental destruction, critical exegesis reveals that its meaning is not univocal; rather, it is shaped by competing interpretive possibilities, textual ambiguities, and scholarly debates concerning its function within ancient Israelite war ideology.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for Further Research*, 72-76.

<sup>16</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 1-4.

<sup>17</sup> Fredrik Warwer, Yakob Godlif Malatuny, and Santy Layan, "Kehilangan Hutan, Kehilangan Masa Depan: Krisis Ekologi Dalam Pendekatan Biblis," *DIEGESIS: Jurnal Teologi Kharismatika* 7, no. 1 (June 27, 2024): 55–70, <https://ojs.sttrealbatam.ac.id/index.php/diegesis/article/view/446>.

<sup>18</sup> Hasiholan Sihalo and Martina Novalina, "Eco-Theology Dalam Kisah Penciptaan," *DIEGESIS: Jurnal Teologi Kharismatika* 3, no. 2 (December 31, 2020): 71–81, <https://ojs.sttrealbatam.ac.id/index.php/diegesis/article/view/79>.

<sup>19</sup> Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary (The Old Testament Library)* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 239-241; Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 85-92.

## Literary Placement and Redactional Context

Within Deuteronomy 20, the war legislation is typically organized around human-centered military and juridical concerns: exhortations to courage and divine assurance in battle (vv. 1–9), procedures for offering peace to distant cities and regulating conquest (vv. 10–15), and the command of total destruction (*herem*) directed against certain Canaanite populations (vv. 16–18). In this structure, verses 19–20 appear to interrupt the expected anthropocentric flow by redirecting attention from human combatants to non-human, arboreal entities, thereby introducing an unusual legal limitation within a context otherwise characterized by expansive authorization of violence.

This apparent shift has generated sustained scholarly debate, particularly around questions of compositional history, redactional development, and the ideological coherence of the Deuteronomic war corpus. One interpretive line argues that vv. 19–20 represent a later redactional insertion designed to moderate or ethically constrain the severity of earlier *herem* traditions. On this view, the prohibition on destroying fruit trees (לֹא תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵץ־אֹרֶז, *lō' tašhîṭ 'et- 'ēṣāh*, “you shall not destroy its trees”) functions as a softening mechanism within the broader Deuteronomic legal tradition, introducing restraint into an otherwise totalizing ideology of warfare. Scholars associated with redaction-critical approaches often see here a diachronic layering of legal materials, where an earlier tradition of comprehensive destruction is subsequently qualified by more pragmatic or ethically sensitive editorial activity.<sup>20</sup>

A second interpretive approach resists this diachronic explanation and instead treats vv. 19–20 as integral to the original compositional design of Deuteronomy 20. From this perspective, the passage is not a later ethical correction but part of a coherent legal strategy in which even warfare is subject to regulated limits grounded in economic rationality and resource preservation. The emphasis on fruit trees (עֵץ מֵאֲכָל, *'ēṣ ma 'ākāl*, “tree of food/fruit tree”) is understood not primarily in ecological or moral terms but within the semantic field of agricultural productivity, long-term subsistence, and siege logistics. On this reading, the law reflects a pragmatic distinction between consumable resources and expendable non-fruit-bearing trees (רַק עֵץ אֲשֶׁר תֵּדַע כִּי לֹא־עֵץ מֵאֲכָל הוּא, *raq 'ēṣ 'āšer tēda' kî lō'-'ēṣ ma 'ākāl hū'*, “only a tree which you know is not a food tree”), thereby embedding environmental restraint within the logic of wartime survival.<sup>21</sup>

Lexically, the prohibition employs the verb שָׁחַת (*šāḥat*, “to destroy, ruin, corrupt”), as in לֹא תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵץ־אֹרֶז (*lō' tašhîṭ 'et- 'ēṣāh*, “you shall not destroy its trees”). This term carries a wide semantic range in biblical Hebrew, extending from physical destruction to moral corruption and covenantal violation. This polyvalence has led some scholars to suggest that the command may carry ideological overtones beyond mere resource management, possibly echoing broader Deuteronomic concerns with disorder and covenantal breach. However, others caution against

<sup>20</sup> Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation*, 112-118; Eckart Otto, *Deuteronomium 12 - 34: Zweiter Teilband: 23,16 - 34,12 (Herders Theologischer Kommentar Zum Alten Testament)* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, 2017), 145-148.

<sup>21</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 193-196; Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2012), 469-472.

overextending its semantic field, arguing that in this legal context it primarily denotes concrete acts of physical destruction during siege warfare.<sup>22</sup>

The rhetorical question in v. 19 — *כִּי הֲאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבֹא מְבִיָּיִךְ בְּמִצּוֹר* (“Is the tree of the field a human, that it should be besieged by you?”)—remains one of the most contested interpretive cruxes in the passage. The Masoretic pointing supports an interrogative reading, reinforcing a categorical distinction between human agents of war and non-human natural entities. Yet alternative proposals, drawing on the Septuagint and variant interpretive traditions, suggest a possible concessive or explanatory sense (“for the tree of the field is food for man”), which would shift the emphasis from ethical restraint to instrumental utility. This syntactic ambiguity has fueled divergent readings: one viewing the verse as an ethical demarcation limiting violence against nature, and another interpreting it as a justification for preservation based on human benefit.<sup>23</sup>

Consequently, vv. 19–20 occupy a liminal position within Deuteronomy 20, both structurally and theologically. Whether understood as a redactional moderation of *herem* ideology or as an intrinsic component of a unified legal code, the passage resists a single interpretive resolution. Its lexical ambiguity, syntactic openness, and thematic discontinuity with surrounding war laws continue to sustain scholarly disagreement regarding its function, origin, and ideological intent within the Deuteronomic corpus.

### Structural and Rhetorical Features

The passage adopts a casuistic legal form introduced by the conditional clause *כִּי־תָצוּר* (when you besiege), situating the command within hypothetical wartime conditions. The prohibition *לֹא תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצָהּ* (you shall not destroy its trees) employs the verb *שָׁחַת* (*shāhat*), whose semantic range includes physical destruction, corruption, and moral perversion.<sup>24</sup>

The rhetorical question in v. 19 “Is the tree of the field a human, that it should be besieged by you?” remains one of the most debated elements of the text. The Masoretic punctuation supports an interrogative reading, implying a distinction between human and non-human entities. However, alternative renderings suggest a comparative or concessive sense, emphasizing instrumental value rather than moral status.<sup>25</sup>

### Competing Semantic and Theological Readings

The phrase *עֵץ מֵאֲכָל* (fruit tree) is generally understood as denoting edible productivity, yet its theological significance remains contested. Eco-theological readings emphasize divine

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<sup>22</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy: Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 165-170; Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Volume 4*, ed. Johann Jakob Stamm (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 1366-1368.

<sup>23</sup> Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation*, 95-98; Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary (The Old Testament Library)*, 239-241; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 57-60.

<sup>24</sup> Duane L. Christensen, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 6a, Deuteronomy 1-21:9* (Nashville Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2001), 426-429.

<sup>25</sup> Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation*, 95-98.

provision and ecological balance, while historical-critical approaches caution against imposing modern environmental categories onto ancient agrarian economics.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, *לֹא תִשְׁחִית* has influenced later Jewish ethics, especially *bal tashhit*, a principle prohibiting needless destruction that rabbinic tradition expanded far beyond its original wartime context. However, scholars caution that this later development should not be retroactively projected into the Deuteronomic context as if it originally functioned as an ecological ethic.<sup>27</sup>

### Theological and Ideological Tensions

Deuteronomy's war ideology contains internal tensions: vv. 16–18 mandate total destruction of certain populations, while vv. 19–20 impose restraint on non-human resources. Some scholars therefore describe the passage as evidence of redactional layering rather than a unified ethical system.<sup>28</sup> The rhetorical question concerning the “tree of the field” is also interpreted divergently: either as a moral distinction between human and non-human life or as a pragmatic statement about the irrationality of destroying useful resources.<sup>29</sup>

### Covenant, Land, and Life: A Cautious Synthesis

Within Deuteronomy's theology of land (אֶרֶץ), the passage participates in a broader covenantal framework where land is a divine gift conditioned on obedience (Deut 6:3; 11:9). However, whether this constitutes ecological ethics in the modern sense remains debated.<sup>30</sup> Associations between trees and life imagery (cf. Gen 2:9; Ps 1:3) may support eco-theological readings, but there is a caution against collapsing metaphorical symbolism into normative ecological ethics.<sup>31</sup> The divided opinions on the text, nonetheless cannot totally diminish the ecological heritage identified by the preservation of nature, even during the times of violence.

### Theological and Eco-Hermeneutical Implications of Deuteronomy 20:19–20

Deuteronomy 20:19–20 is interpreted in this study through a critically mediated analogical framework rather than through a direct application to contemporary Nigeria. The text is first reconstructed within its ancient Near Eastern context as part of a siege-based socio-economic system in which warfare, resource use, and survival were closely interconnected. Any contemporary significance is then approached indirectly through carefully qualified socio-political and ecological parallels, thereby preventing anachronistic transfer and conceptual reductionism.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 331-335.

<sup>27</sup> J. David Bleich, *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*, Vol. 4 (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1995), 101-105; Norman Lamm, Ecology in Jewish law and theology. In *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 2006), 162-185.

<sup>28</sup> Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary (The Old Testament Library)*, 240-242.

<sup>29</sup> Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation*, 97-100.

<sup>30</sup> John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 285-290.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 340-344.

<sup>32</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 279-285.

Within its original setting, the passage reflects a legal attempt to regulate the destructive logic of siege warfare by introducing limits on resource exploitation. However, rather than being read primarily as a timeless ecological ethic, it is better understood as a context-specific negotiation between military necessity and economic survival. Fruit-bearing trees represent long-term productive capital in an agrarian economy, and their preservation is therefore tied not only to theological considerations but also to material sustainability and post-conflict recovery capacity. This reading introduces an economic dimension often underdeveloped in purely theological interpretations.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, the text participates in broader covenantal discourse in the Hebrew Bible in which land is framed as a divinely granted but conditional space of life and productivity. The covenantal relationship between God, people, and land reflects a worldview in which ethical behavior is inseparable from ecological and social stability. Yet this covenantal structure is not merely devotional; it is also politically and socially embedded, regulating how a community organizes power, distributes resources, and legitimizes violence. In this sense, Deuteronomy functions as a form of legal-theological governance, where divine authority structures social order and restricts totalizing forms of destruction.<sup>34</sup>

However, a critical reading must also recognize that Deuteronomy's war ideology contains power asymmetries and legitimations of violence that complicate any straightforward ethical appropriation. While vv. 19–20 introduce restraint, earlier commands in the same chapter authorize severe forms of warfare against certain populations. This tension suggests that the text does not present a consistent ecological ethic but rather a hierarchically structured system of controlled violence, in which limits are strategically placed rather than universally applied. From a political-theological perspective, these legal distinctions function to regulate sovereign violence rather than abolish it.<sup>35</sup>

The rhetorical distinction between human combatants and non-human life (Is the tree of the field a human...?) can therefore be read not only as ecological restraint but also as a classification strategy within a broader regime of wartime decision-making, where value is assigned according to utility, survivability, and strategic necessity. This interpretation tempers overly theological readings by foregrounding the socio-political logic embedded in ancient legal discourse.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, while covenant theology provides an important interpretive horizon, it must be understood alongside the material and institutional realities of land-based economies. The land is not only a theological symbol but also a site of production, taxation, survival, and political control. Its "sacredness" is therefore inseparable from its function within ancient

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<sup>33</sup> Block, *Deuteronomy: The NIV Application Commentary*, 469-472.

<sup>34</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 259-265.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 44-52.

<sup>36</sup> Otto, *Deuteronomium 12 - 34: Zweiter Teilband: 23,16 - 34,12 (Herders Theologischer Kommentar Zum Alten Testament)*, 145-148.

systems of governance and subsistence. This prevents an overly spiritualized reading that detaches ecological concern from economic and political structures.<sup>37</sup>

In contemporary application, particularly within Nigeria's conflict-affected regions, the text is not treated as a direct normative guide but as a comparative ethical resource that raises critical questions about the governance of environmental harm in conditions of insecurity. Ecological degradation in conflict settings is better understood through a multi-dimensional analytical lens that moves beyond moral attribution to examine the underlying structures that produce environmental harm. These include the political organization of security and counterinsurgency operations, the economic pressures generated by fuel dependence, subsistence survival strategies, and extractive resource systems, as well as the complex power relations that exist among state institutions, armed groups, and affected local communities. The Lake Chad Basin, which extends across Nigeria's northeastern frontier, offers a particularly instructive case: decades of ecological stress, compounded by armed conflict and population displacement, have accelerated the degradation of land and water resources that millions of people depend upon for survival.<sup>38</sup> Taken together, these dynamics indicate that environmental destruction in conflict zones is not merely the result of ethical failure, but is deeply embedded in intersecting systems of governance, violence, and economic survival.

Within this framework, Deuteronomy 20:19–20 is not employed as a direct ethical template for contemporary practice, but rather as a dialogical interpretive resource that helps to illuminate enduring tensions between restraint, necessity, and destruction across both ancient and modern contexts. Its value lies in its capacity to stimulate critical reflection on how societies regulate violence and manage environmental resources under conditions of insecurity, without assuming direct continuity between historical settings.<sup>39</sup>

In a similar vein, the later Jewish interpretation of *bal tashhit* is acknowledged as a significant ethical development emerging from rabbinic engagement with the text, in which a specific wartime restriction is expanded into a broader moral principle against wasteful destruction. While this interpretive tradition provides useful insights for environmental ethics, its application to contemporary Nigerian contexts must be approached with caution. This is necessary to avoid the uncritical transplantation of later theological frameworks into socio-political environments characterized by distinct histories of conflict, governance, and resource-related violence.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Norman Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE* (London: A&C Black, 1999), 598-603.

<sup>38</sup> United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Lake Chad Basin: GIWA Regional Assessment 43, Global International Waters Assessment* (Kalmar, Sweden: University of Kalmar, 2004), <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/8808>, 45-52; Barry Turner, *Lake Chad Basin: Humanitarian Snapshot (as of 28 August 2023)* (Niamey, 2023), <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/nigeria/lake-chad-basin-humanitarian-snapshot-28-august-2023>.

<sup>39</sup> William T Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 90-96.

<sup>40</sup> David Mevorach Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 145-152.

## **Application of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 to Selected Conflict-Affected Sites in Nigeria**

The ethical logic of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 becomes more analytically meaningful when examined in relation to specific conflict-affected environments rather than Nigeria in general terms. A more empirically grounded reading therefore focuses on identifiable sites such as the Sambisa Forest axis (Borno State), parts of Zamfara State affected by armed banditry, and the Niger Delta mangrove corridor, where environmental degradation has been documented through field reports, satellite-based assessments, and humanitarian monitoring data.<sup>41</sup>

In the Sambisa Forest region, studies by environmental monitoring agencies and humanitarian field reports indicate that prolonged military operations against insurgent groups have contributed to vegetation loss through the construction of forward operating bases, restricted-access clearance zones, and repeated bush burning for tactical visibility.<sup>42</sup> In addition, displaced civilian populations have intensified pressure on remaining biomass through fuelwood extraction for cooking and heating in internally displaced persons (IDP) settlements surrounding Maiduguri.<sup>43</sup> In this context, the Deuteronomic restriction on the destruction of fruit-bearing trees can be read as a principle of non-combatant ecological infrastructure protection, raising critical questions about whether security operations sufficiently integrate environmental safeguards into counterinsurgency planning.

Similarly, in parts of Zamfara State, field observations linked to armed banditry and rural displacement show extensive degradation of farmlands and tree cover due to settlement abandonment, uncontrolled logging, and survival-driven exploitation of woodland resources.<sup>44</sup> Here, deforestation is not only a by-product of violence but also of collapsed land governance structures and informal survival economies, where displaced populations rely heavily on forest resources in the absence of regulated energy systems. The Deuteronomic logic of restricting unnecessary destruction becomes relevant only when interpreted alongside these socio-economic constraints, rather than as a direct normative injunction.

In the Niger Delta mangrove ecosystem, environmental reports and oil industry impact assessments have long documented large-scale vegetation loss linked to oil exploration infrastructure, pipeline sabotage, artisanal refining, and military surveillance operations.<sup>45</sup> Mangrove clearance for illegal refining sites and security clearings has had measurable ecological consequences, including biodiversity decline and coastal erosion.<sup>46</sup> In this setting, the concern of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 may be analogically related to debates on critical infrastructure protection versus ecological degradation, particularly where security responses intersect with extractive economies.

From a policy analysis perspective, Nigeria's existing legal framework—including the Forestry Act, NESREA regulations, and environmental impact assessment guidelines—

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<sup>41</sup> (UNEP), *Lake Chad Basin: GIWA Regional Assessment 43*, 33–41.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Global Data Institute Displacement Tracking Matrix: Nigeria West and Central Africa* (Switzerland, 2023), <https://dtm.iom.int/nigeria>.

<sup>44</sup> Tirana Hassan, "Nigeria Events of 2022," *Human Rights Watch: World Report 2023*, last modified 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/nigeria>.

<sup>45</sup> (UNEP), *Lake Chad Basin: GIWA Regional Assessment 43*, 21–30.

<sup>46</sup> United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland* (Nairobi, 2011), <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/environmental-assessment-ogoniland>.

provides formal mechanisms for environmental protection, yet enforcement in conflict-affected zones remains inconsistent due to institutional fragmentation and security constraints.<sup>47</sup> In practice, environmental safeguards are rarely integrated into operational military directives or emergency governance protocols, revealing a gap between legal architecture and field implementation. This gap is particularly evident in IDP host communities, where environmental pressure is intensified but regulatory oversight is weakest.

Read against this empirical background, Deuteronomy 20:19–20 does not function as a direct policy template but as a comparative ethical lens that foregrounds the tension between security imperatives and ecological sustainability. Its relevance emerges not from direct applicability but from its capacity to interrogate how modern conflict systems manage—or fail to manage—the environmental costs of violence.

However, this interpretive approach remains dependent on specific socio-political configurations within Nigeria’s conflict-affected regions. These include the operational structure of counterinsurgency governance in Borno State, the dynamics of informal resource economies within rural displacement corridors in Zamfara, and the entanglement of extractive industries with security arrangements in the Niger Delta. Each of these contexts shapes how environmental resources are accessed, controlled, and degraded under conditions of insecurity.

Accordingly, the ethical inquiry moves beyond abstract theological reflection toward a more concrete analysis of governance practices. The central concern becomes how environmental resources are categorized and managed within security operations, who exercises authority over their use in displacement settings, and what institutional safeguards, if any, exist to mitigate ecological collapse during periods of sustained conflict.

Within this empirically informed perspective, Deuteronomy 20:19–20 is most appropriately read not as a universal ethical directive, but as a comparative framework for examining the regulation of violence and environmental limitation. Its significance lies in drawing attention to the often-neglected environmental dimensions of conflict governance, particularly in contexts where military necessity, survival-based economies, and weak regulatory institutions converge to intensify ecological vulnerability.

## CONCLUSION

This study analyzed Deuteronomy 20:19–20 as a case of regulated wartime environmental restraint within its ancient legal setting and as a comparative lens for reflecting on ecological degradation in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria. Rather than treating the passage as a direct ethical template, the study situated it within broader debates on war, resource limitation, and controlled destruction, thereby clarifying how ecological

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<sup>47</sup> General I. B. Babangida, *Environmental Impact Assessment Decree 1992, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria* (Abuja, Nigeria, December 10, 1992), <https://gazettes.africa/archive/ng/1966/ng-government-gazette-supplement-dated-1966-01-26-no-6-part-a.pdf>; Umaru Musa Yaradua, “National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (ESTABLISHMENT) Act, 2007,” *NESREA* (Abuja, Nigeria, July 30, 2007), last modified July 30, 2007, <https://lawsofnigeria.placng.org/laws/nesrea.pdf>; Nigeria Federal Department of Forestry, *Approved National Forest Policy, 2006* (Abuja: Forestry Department, Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2006).

considerations are embedded—though not systematically developed—in biblical legal discourse.

The study's principal scholarly contribution lies in its reframing of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 as a text of conditional ecological limitation within war governance, rather than a fully developed environmental ethic. It demonstrates that the passage functions primarily as a constraint within a system of sanctioned violence, and only secondarily as a resource for ecological reflection. This shifts interpretation away from purely theological or moral readings toward a more critically mediated understanding that integrates legal, economic, and political dimensions of ancient warfare discourse.

In relation to the Nigerian context, the study contributes an analytical model of “conflict-sensitive ecological reading”, which emphasizes the need to interpret environmental degradation not solely as moral failure but as an outcome of intersecting governance failures, survival economies, and security operations. This model avoids direct normative transfer and instead highlights how biblical texts can be used to interrogate structural tensions between military necessity and environmental sustainability.

### **Recommendations**

The study advances several targeted, context-specific recommendations aimed at addressing the intersection of conflict and environmental degradation. *First*, military institutions operating in forested and agrarian conflict zones should integrate environmental risk assessment into operational planning. This includes regulating vegetation clearance, managing the establishment of temporary bases, and ensuring environmentally sensitive practices in and around internally displaced persons' settlements. *Second*, environmental agencies are encouraged to develop conflict-sensitive monitoring systems in collaboration with security and humanitarian actors. Such frameworks would enable systematic tracking of deforestation and ecological stress in both active and post-conflict regions, particularly in areas such as Borno, Zamfara, and the Niger Delta.

*Third*, post-conflict recovery strategies should include structured ecological restoration programmes. These should prioritize reforestation and land rehabilitation while simultaneously supporting livelihood recovery for displaced populations, ensuring that environmental restoration is linked to socio-economic reintegration. *Fourth*, there is a need for an integrated policy review of land governance and security frameworks. Such a review should examine how military operations interact with land-use systems, with the aim of reducing unintended ecological harm and improving coordination between environmental and security institutions. *Fifth*, future academic inquiry should focus on context-specific comparative studies between biblical war ethics and African land-based ethical traditions. Rather than broad theological synthesis, such research should emphasize localized case studies to generate more grounded and context-sensitive ecological frameworks.

Thus, the study makes a contribution that is principally methodological and interpretive rather than prescriptive. It advances a carefully controlled hermeneutical framework that resists the direct transposition of ancient legal norms into modern contexts, while still demonstrating how such texts can function as critical analytical tools for examining

the interconnected dynamics of warfare, governance, and environmental transformation in contemporary conflict settings.

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