

Theology for sustainable development in Zimbabwe: Unpacking Deuteronomy 20:19–20 in light of SDG 15

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Research Project Registration:**Project Leader:** A.G. van Aarde**Project No:** 2334682**Description:**

This research is part of the research project, 'Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics', directed by Prof. Andries van Aarde, Post Retirement Professor and Senior Research Fellow in the Dean's Office, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

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Dates:

Received: 01 May 2023

Accepted: 29 June 2023

Published: 18 Dec. 2023

How to cite this article:

Mudewairi, M., 2023, 'Theology for sustainable development in Zimbabwe: Unpacking Deuteronomy 20:19–20 in light of SDG 15', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(4), a8938. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i4.8938>

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This article aims at a 'green' reading of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 with special reference to combat deforestation in Zimbabwe. The article relates to Sustainable Development Goal 15 (SDG 15) of the United Nations Agenda 2030, namely Goal 15 – Life and Land. The article demonstrates that the depletion of the natural environment in Zimbabwe is happening in a way unknown before. It argues that the government of Zimbabwe's legislative framework for mitigating deforestation is proving to be unsuccessful. This is a pointer that environmental conservation problems in Zimbabwe are also spiritual, hence the need to incorporate additional conservation strategies like biblical hermeneutics. The value addition of this article is the application of the Deuteronomic laws. From the perspective of the exegesis of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 and the surrounding texts, the article focuses on the deforestation in Zimbabwe and aims at the recovering of spiritual strategies of valuing human life without compromising the right of the natural environment. Applying the reading for recovery design, the study gathered data through extensive literature review and biblical exegesis.

Contribution: The exegesis of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 is applied to desist from the disproportionate cutting down of trees even during the difficult times such as war, economic hardship and health pandemics. The article contributes to the SDG 15, namely Life and Land. The research envisions that Zimbabwean communities, with the support of the aforementioned exegesis will introduce a programme of deforestation. Trees ought to be considered as of equal value to human beings. The Bible continues to be not bound by space and time and can still be applicable to the contemporary needs of the believers.

Keywords: reading for recovery; United Nations Agenda 2030; sustainable development goals; SDG 15; biblical exegesis.

Introduction

The nexus between sustainable development and environmental conservation is clearly spelt out in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030 Agenda. All the nations of the world are being mandated to ensure development that also considers the conservation of the natural environment. Failure to utilise the environment in a just manner is hindering sustainable development in Zimbabwe and other African continents. It is against the mandate to ensure the realisation of the sustainable development goals that Zimbabwe as a nation joins the rest of the world in coming up with mitigation measures to halt the depletion of the natural environment. In the effort for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Number 15 to become a reality in sustaining life on land in Zimbabwe, there is a need to make use of every possible strategy with the potential to halt environmental degradation. The depletion of the natural environment is the major stumbling block to development in Zimbabwe. The ineffectiveness of Western scientific methods to avert environmental degradation in Zimbabwe points to the need for supplementary methods to be in use. The article finds it vital for the government of Zimbabwe not to only rely on the Western environmental conservation methodologies but also to make use of the Judeo-Christian biblical environmental laws regarding the conservation of the environment.

The justification to also consider the environment from a biblical perspective is because of Christianity being the dominant religion in Zimbabwe with about 87% followers (Galal 2023). Chitando (2007:6; Gunda 2014:19) argues that, in line with the Judeo-Christian communities in Zimbabwe, the Bible is one of the widely consulted literature as a solution to the burdens of the

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Note: Special Collection: Zimbabwean Scholars in Dialogue, sub-edited by Conrad Chibango (Great Zimbabwe University).

hour. Christians believe that the message of the Bible is contextual; it is the book for the literate and the illiterate that is always read at home, in churches and at school. Manyonganise (2022:2) expresses that it is crucial to note that the voice of the churches is important in Zimbabwean society because the majority of Zimbabweans are Christians. Christian leaders interact with members of their churches at a more personal level, and they have the power to influence their members' decisions. For religious communities in general, to only concentrate on saving the soul and preaching of humanity as sojourners demonstrate theological injustice. In responding to the needs of the communities, religious leaders are mandated to consider the practical aspect of theology by not only promising people paradise but also doing justice to the material needs of the people. The theology that does not respond to the needs of the people is dead and valueless.

Deuteronomy 20:19–20 reads that:

When you besiege a city for a long time, while making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them, do not cut them down to use in the siege, for the tree of the field is man's food.... (RSV Bible)

The text from Deuteronomy 20:19–20 commands the ancient Israelites' soldiers to protect the trees at all costs, even in the difficult times of the war. Even if the trees are in the land of thy enemy, the Israelites' soldiers ought to take good care of them because they are important to both the enemy and themselves. This article dialogues with Deuteronomy 20:19–20 in a bid to recover its potential for a unique environmental consciousness that can even surpass the ecological experiments of a modern scientist in Judeo-Christian communities in Zimbabwe.

Reading for recovery of eco-theology in Zimbabwe

Reading for recovery is a hermeneutic that is also called 'apologetic reading', which attempts to respond to Lynn White's accusation by showing that biblical traditions are rather eco-friendly (Kavusa 2022:5). This hermeneutical approach was named by Watson as a 'strategy of recovery' of the eco-friendliness of biblical texts. The readings of recovery argue that the Bible is not itself the problem, but the problem came through the acts of later interpreters, who obscured and distorted the positive meaning of the original (Loader 1987:9). The intention is to rescue the Bible from the charge that biblical texts endorse an anthropocentric vision legitimising utilitarian and abusive attitudes towards the natural world (Watson 1992:81). Thus, from the eco-theological stance, although the Bible seems to be an inconvenient text, a 'green' reading of the Hebrew Bible is possible. Habel (2009), in the interpretation of anthropomorphism, vigorously argued that the conclusion that Christianity is environmentally insensitive is associated with misinterpretation of the Bible by the modern interpreters. A revisit of the historical critical method can help in interpreting the biblical texts that support environmental conservation. Thus, reading of recovery has

the notion that the Bible too can be a solution to mitigate environmental degradation once the texts are read afresh from the perspective of the earth. Therefore, the Christian Bible is of timeless value.

Eco-theology can be regarded as one of the newest branches of practical theology that focuses on the contribution of religion to the conservation of the environment. It can be regarded as a philosophical movement that largely blames humanity for the ecological crisis currently facing the mother Earth (Puleo 2017:30). In order to halt problems of climate change and ecological degradation, eco-theologians believe that religious texts are a rich source that can be utilised to curb environmental degradation. Judeo-Christian believers agree that God mandates human beings to be stewards of the environment.

It is from the perspective of eco-theology that Christians in Zimbabwe are seen to be active in the conservation of the environment from a spiritual perspective. The central discussion in this section is hinged on the reading of recovery, thereby tracking the context in which religion is active in the conservation of the environment in Zimbabwe. The whole idea is to recover the potential of religion as an important vehicle for sustainable development.

In the section on, 'Towards an African Theology of the environment', Daneel (1999:vol. 2, p. XVI) revolves around the possibility of the conservation of the environment from a Christian missiological perspective in Zimbabwe. Through African Initiated Churches, Zimbabwe is a member of the largest Christian grassroots environmental and tree planting movement in Southern Africa that was established in order to engage in earth healing rituals and ceremonies (maporesanyika), all because of the problems of deforestation, pollution and the extinction of species. The article is in tandem with Daneel on the need to consider religion in matters of the environment, but this time with much emphasis on Sustainable Development Goal Number 15.

Still on eco-theology in Zimbabwe, the work also recovers the contribution of ecofeminism to sustainable development in Zimbabwe. Ecofeminism can also be classified under reading for recovery as the movement manages to recover the link between gender inequalities and the degradation of nature (Warren 1987). The starting point of ecofeminism is the Bible in which God regards all as equal. In Genesis 1:27, both men and women have been given responsibilities to take good care of the environment and failure to do that is a sin. Insights of ecofeminism in Zimbabwe are clear in the work of Manyonganise, Chitando and Chirongoma (2023) who deliberated on Women, Leadership and Religion in Zimbabwe from an ecofeminist perspective. As all are equal before God, the editors point out the need to settle gender issues in order to win the war against ecological degradation in Zimbabwe. From the perspective of ecofeminism, there is a need to first address the problems of women domination by men as the starting point to realise the liberation of the

environment that will in turn lead to sustainable development. Although ecofeminism is not referring to the Deuteronomic laws of warfare, the movement recovers the need to also consider the Bible when dealing with environmental issues in Christian societies.

Zimbabwe's Christian communities like the Catholics are also making use of the Papal encyclicals to ensure theology for sustainable development. Pope Francis's *Laudato Si* (2015:20) is so far regarded as the watershed for the call of humanity to be active in the conservation of the natural environment. According to the Pope, the Earth is a common home for everyone. Failure to keep the Earth in a good state affects all the creation. In *Laudato Si*, the reading of recovery is applicable because the Pope manages to recover the biblical message that human beings are largely responsible for environmental degradation through violating God's mandate for them to subdue the earth as pointed out in Genesis 1:27–28. A re-reading of the Bible to recover God's voice on environmental conservation becomes potent.

Mutambara (2008:ii) analyses the problems of land degradation in Zimbabwe communal areas as hindering sustainable development. The outcome of the analysis is the problem of the land conservation policies in Zimbabwe that relegates the indigenous and spiritual modes of environmental conservation and favours the Western scientific strategies of conserving the environment. The same sentiments are also seen in the works of Jerie (2010), Mawere (2013), Magagula (2016), Mujinga (2019) and Takure (2022), who then suggested for rethinking environmental conservation in Zimbabwe. Given that the lives of the Christians in Zimbabwe cannot be detached from their culture and religion, it then becomes vital to also consider the cultural and spiritual ways of conserving nature from that perspective. This is enough evidence to prove that, ecological problems in Zimbabwe are not only scientific.

Unpacking the United Nations sustainable development goal number 15 and the government of Zimbabwe's legislative efforts

In order to justify the need to avert deforestation from the Judeo-Christian theological perspective, it is crucial to first unpack the SDG Number 15 of the United Nations Agenda 2030. The purpose of SDG 15 can shed more light on the importance of the injunctions against pointless and senseless deforestation as purported by Deuteronomy 20:19–20. According to UN Environment (2019), SDG Number 15 focuses on Life on Land through the conservation and sustainable use of forests, other terrestrial ecosystems and biodiversity, including halting desertification and land degradation and combatting illegal trade in endangered species. With such targets, SDG Number 15 is one of the most ambitious and wide-ranging SDGs because it encompasses all types of land-based ecosystems and biodiversity. A close analysis of SDG Number 15 indicates the importance of

sustainable management of the natural environment and how it affects all the 17 goals. The attainment of SDG Number 15 therefore rests upon the control of the natural resources, specifically trees. (Griggs et al. 2017:236) opines that the failure to sustainably manage the forests affects the ecosystem as close to 80% of the terrestrial plants and animal species are found in the forests. Already 8% of the animal and plant species are also at risk of extinction, and there is an indication that the remaining 22% are already at risk. All this points to the importance and urgency of the need to sustainably manage forests.

However, the management of the forests remains a challenge despite the government measures that are put in place. The Forestry Commission of Zimbabwe (2022)'s report to the government of Zimbabwe on drivers of deforestation and forest degradation indicates that the government of Zimbabwe has put in place the legal instruments to manage forests sustainably, but still deforestation remains a challenge. In this report, the authors refer to the *Forest Act* (Chapter 19:05) and the *Communal Land Forest Produce Act* (Chapter 19:04), the government gazetted through the government parastatal, Forestry Commission. 'It is an offence to cut, injure, remove, and collect any forest produce without authority and to move firewood from one place to another without a timber movement permit issued by the Forestry Commission'. Section 55 of the *Forest Act* mandates the seeking of permission from the forestry commission when cutting down indigenous trees. The *Forest Regulations Act* manages the movement and trade of timber in Zimbabwe. In addition to the legal frameworks, there are complementary legal instruments which are: *Environmental Management Act*, *Traditional Leaders Act*, *Rural District Councils Act*, *Plant and Pest and Diseases Act* and the *Parks and Wildlife Act* (Gotore et al. 2019). The purpose of the legal frameworks and instruments is meant to protect the environment at large and specifically the forests which are the life-supporting hub. The overall aim is to achieve environmental conservation for sustainable development.

However, with all these government initiatives to deal with deforestation, the danger of forests depletion remains in Zimbabwe. This becomes a challenge for sustainable development. Without the good use of the natural resources, one cannot talk of development. Combating deforestation is the ground plan for sustainable development in Zimbabwe. Given the widespread devastation of the environment by the activities of human beings, who, for many reasons, do not follow the government laws and regulations, biblical wisdom can be of profound help. The section 'Background to Deuteronomy Chapter 20:19–20' is an interpretation of Deuteronomy 20:19–20, so as to deduce how the Bible can inform modern environmental conservation practices.

Background to Deuteronomy Chapter 20:19–20

The entire presentation of Chapters 12–26 of Deuteronomy is the emphasis on the Decalogue. The sixth commandment

that prohibits murder becomes the key verse (Van der Walt 2016:4). The arrangement of Deuteronomy 20 resembles the laws spelt out in the Decalogue. The value of life in these chapters is of paramount importance. This is reinforced in the prohibition against changing the position of the landmark and even someone resulting in the death penalty, but as a result of false accusation (Wenham 2003:137). All this indicates the importance of valuing human life at whatever cost. The Deuteronomic laws in Chapter 20 pertaining to the expected conduct and behaviour during the war have also been the central aspect of revering the human life. In this sense, sustainability evolves around the priority of human life but without considering the environment as of less value. In recognising the importance of human life, Deuteronomy Chapter 20 is not undermining the environment in favour of human beings.

Three major themes form the basis of the whole chapter of Deuteronomy 20. The major themes are all related in as much as they consider the utmost protection of human life even at the peak of the battle front. Thompson (1974:236) alludes to the sub-units of Deuteronomy 20 into the following themes: Deuteronomy Chapter 20:1–9 pertains to the fitness and suitability of soldiers going to war and the duty of the priests to stabilise them mentally so that they become courageous. The recent home owners, those with vineyards that are due for selling and the newly wedded were discouraged to be part of the army going out for war as they might cause confusion and unnecessary loss of life because of unsettled minds thinking of the wife back home and at the same to concentrate on the war. Given that war will have casualties and the deceased, an option to ensure that life continues after the war is in bold (Van Der Walt 2016:4). Deuteronomy Chapter 20:10–18 gives details and distances of the cities to be attacked, and the first thing was to offer terms of peace. There are also fine details on how they were to eventually conquer. In doing so, Deuteronomy 20:19–20 spells out how they were to sustain the environment amid the battles. This is the key verse for this article, the commands to warrant the survival of the trees during the time of war. All these provisions were meant to guard against the unnecessary loss of life, hence, the key concept of sustainability. In the Zimbabwean context of deforestation, the text alludes to the necessity of re-evaluating the human actions with direct or indirect bearing to human life. In this case, deforestation has the potential to cost human life, whether it is done as survival tactics or for economic development. The wisdom of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 revolves around the importance of human life through the effective management of the environment, which human beings depend.

An exegesis of Deuteronomy Chapter 20:19–20

The background to the formulation of the warfare laws expressed in Deuteronomy 20:19–20 can be traced back to the military strategies of the Ancient Near East neighbours of the Israelites. Assyrian battles would encompass the use of lethal

and sophisticated military tactics as well as advanced siege equipment that may be equated to present-day automated machine guns and heavy artillery. The Ancient Near East societies such as Assyria and Babylon were known for the total destruction of all the cities they captured. Such cities were rendered useless and incapable of supporting any life. Equally shocking are scenarios where forests were left without trees. A good illustration is captured by Karlsson (2013:202) referencing to the cutting down of orchard trees by the Assyrian Army during the reign of Tigleth-pileser 1. In his campaign against Suhi, he claims, 'their orchards I cut down'. There is also a reference to the smashing of lofty cities and reaping out of grain from their fields of sustenance as well as the cutting down of their trees and destroying the orchards. 'Over their mountains he makes the Deluge pass'. Tukulti-Ninurta II, in his attack against the land of Mushki, claims to burn their cities with wrath and 'the crops of their fields (orchards)...'. From the above description of warfare, although what counted on the part of the rulers was only victory, it could have been sensible to also conserve the environment.

From the above exposition, Wright (2015:161) articulates that uricide is an unethical behaviour that concerns the total erasure of the city's memory and identity. In this case, no one and nothing is spared, and it was regarded as a total victory by the Ancient Near East rulers. Such kind of behaviour that completely wipes away the identity of lineages was castigated and condoned in Ancient Israel. Such unethical kind of behaviour rendered the environment barren. The trees, gardens, grain, livestock and orchards were the targets of the Ancient Kings upon besieging a city. It is this kind of behaviour that the Israelites were instructed to refrain from as this would have negative effects on both the current and future generations. For whatever reason, the senseless destruction of the environment with much emphasis on the cutting down of trees and even burning down of cities can never be justified. All this is stemming from the interdependent relationship between the human beings and nature that should be a constant reminder when development or victory takes precedence over conservation.

An application of the reading for recovery mode implies that although the text Deuteronomy 20:19–20 has translation issues, the fact that the central aspect is the interdependent relationship between trees and human beings is inescapable. The implication of the interrogation that, 'For is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you?' (v. 19), refers to the inability of the natural environment to defend itself against the human beings. Human beings should bear in mind that trees do not have hands to wage war against humanity or even legs to run away in the event of deforestation. The depiction of the environment as defenceless against humanity is a pointer for human beings to utmost conserve the environment. The message here is that, any challenges that human being may face, should not compromise the conservation of the environment. Nature should not be disturbed by the activities of human beings,

but human activities should support the growth of nature. Wolff based a comment on Deuteronomy 20:19–20:

‘[Y]our war is with humans, there is no need for the trees to suffer as they have a life of their own: they don’t just exist to serve human needs’. (Wolff 2011:146)

This is exactly what is happening in Zimbabwe, as a result of climate change, people are ravaging the natural environment, instead of nurturing it. Yet the Deuteronomic laws are against anthropomorphism when it comes to the relationship between nature and human beings. Deuteronomy 20:19–20 is acquainted with the interpretation of how human beings ought to deal with extreme cases like war while respecting human life and at the same time without compromising the natural environment. It is the religious alignment to ecology that is essential in the formulation of the biblically based environmental prescription that can be applied alongside, science, indigenous knowledge and any other conservation methods to curtail deforestation in Zimbabwe. Trees contribute to the life of human beings, hence there is a need to sustainably manage them.

According to Bar-Am and Bar-Am (2016), in their work on exploring Israel’s biblical foliage, fruit trees such as the fig, olive, vines, carob and many more were common in Ancient Israel as valuable diet for them. Grapes, further to being processed to wine, were also an export commodity, hence they were grown on a large scale. A lot of fruits also grow naturally in the wild forests. It can be inferred that the biblical ancient communities relied on fruits for survival as they were considered a staple food. This also alludes to why Ancient Israel societies valued the planting of trees. *Tu B’shevat* and also *Rosh Hashanah* are special holidays allocated for the planting of trees (Karabelnicoff 2023). New Year for trees is an indication of environmental conservation for sustainable development among the ancient Jews. The 15th of *Shevout* is declared a holiday even in modern Israel so as to celebrate the importance of trees. Even the carob trees that would take close to more than seven decades to reach maturity were found in most households. This was an expression that one plants a carob tree not for themselves but for the generations to come. According to Gerstenhaber (2015:1), the famous ancient Judaic story of Honi explains this. Honi was asked why he was planting a tree that would not bear fruit until long after his death. His response was that when he came into the world, he found carob trees that had been planted by those who came before him, so he was doing the same for his descendants. All this points to the human life that is hinged on the trees as life-sustaining for the Israelites. Trees are important given that they provide fruits which were for feeding the community, and cutting them down was a violation of the terms and conditions of war time. As a result, the environmental laws to save trees were reiterated during war times. War is a period of devastation especially on the part of the enemy. Yahweh expressed the need to take heed of the environmental protection at all costs, regardless of the situation. Schwartz (1997:358) opines that the Israelites were obliged to spare trees during the war as they depend on them. The same can

be applied to the Zimbabwean context as people also rely on trees.

Brueggemann (2001:13) shared the same sentiments as he alludes to the food chain. Trees are important components in the food chain, hence the random cutting down of trees can disturb the whole process. It is for this reason that humanity by nature has certain limitations like considering the trees to have been created for the sole reason of human use when dealing with the natural environment. The environment on its own has its rights that should not be infringed by the rights and activities of the human beings. Above all, the human–nature interdependence relationship cuts above any move to cut down trees in a way that causes deforestation. With such biblical perspectives on the environment, the application of such knowledge to deal with deforestation in Zimbabwe may offer positive results.

Yahweh values nature as well as a human life as indicated by the prohibitions against vandalising the life-giving units, hence sustainable development. According to Wright (2008:424), what should be emphasised in interpreting Deuteronomy 20:19–20 is the conservation of nature that will in turn prolong human life. These are essential lessons that Zimbabwe can apply towards the objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Number 15 which has been crafted to value life on land as the key for ecological conservation. In other words, this is the message that Deuteronomy 20:19–20 is emphasising and this can fit neatly on the road to the conservation of life on land in Zimbabwe as spelt out in the SDG Number 15 of the United Nations Agenda 2030.

The concept of *BalTaschit* as propelled in Deuteronomy 20:19–20

Kornfeld (2021:1051) states that *BalTaschit* is the Hebrew law which means ‘do not destroy’. It derives from the Torah’s regarding the unwarranted destruction, senseless killing and even the discarding of useful objects. In this context, the ancient and modern interpreters of the Bible further analysed Deuteronomy 20:19–20 and come up with an extended explanation on the basis of needless destruction. Stein (2022:3) opines that the rabbis of the Talmud understood these verses to be communicating a general prohibition against unnecessary destruction. The argument by the rabbis during the Talmud period pertains to the reading for recovery, whereby the verse is about the cutting down of trees but the meaning could also be extended to encompass all forms of wasteful destruction. Thus, anyone who intentionally wastes the natural or man-made resources has sinned and therefore violates the law.

Anything from which humans can derive benefits deserves to be sustainably managed (Wolff 2011:149). Alongside the interpretation of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 as also referring to needless destruction, the prohibition to destroy fruit trees implies that it is forbidden to destroy anything that is beneficial to humankind (Wolff 2011:146). Maimonides’

Mishneh Torah justifies that a tree may be cut down if it damages other trees or causes harm to neighbouring fields. According to Maimonides, the Torah only forbids wilful destruction. In this sense, the verse can be understood as making it clear that human beings are not barred from making use of God's creation but are warned against deforestation with no constructive purposes. The reference that the law allows both the enemy and the besieged to eat from the fruit trees but without cutting down trees is a strong reminder on the concept of sustainability as the trees need to continue producing fruits even after the war. Wolff (2011:146) commented that while the fruits may be consumed, the producers of the fruits must be preserved to keep the circle of food chain by also providing for the future. In this sense, the needless cutting down of trees is forbidden, not only in wartimes but always, hence the possibility of retrieving environmental wisdom from the Deuteronomic laws in order to combat deforestation in Zimbabwe.

The basic message of *Bal Tashchit* is that there is a need for the utilisation of the natural resources in a sustainable way; hence, deforestation points to the failure of humanity to conserve the natural environment. All this implies the restoration of the depleting resources as a step towards the attainment of SDG 15 in Zimbabwe from a religious perspective. According to Deuteronomy 20:19–20, whatever affects plant and animal life affects humanity as well. If we destroy other kinds of living things on this earth, we are also destroying ourselves (Barret 2009:15). The most important lessons we can teach our children are that not only do all living things depend upon each other, but also what we do today affects what the world will be like tomorrow (Thomas 2013:85). Each generation is linked to the next by its actions. Regarding sustainable development, humanity depends on what those who came before us did, as the next generations also depend on the current sustainable management of the environment.

Conclusion

Deuteronomy 20:19–20 challenges the superiority of human beings over nature. It is this anthropocentric view of the natural environment that is driving human beings to exploit the environment in such a way that is leading to the depletion of the natural resources like trees. The application of the scientific ways to mitigate deforestation in Zimbabwe without taking into account the reasons why environmental degradation continues, explains why the deforestation rate is increasing. Deuteronomy 20:19–20 helps Judeo-Christian communities to trace the root cause of the unsustainable utilisation of the natural environment to the human–nature relationship. Viewing the natural environment as less valued than human beings provides the basis for unwarranted exploitation of resources. A green interpretation of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 places the natural resources as of equal value with the human beings. Neither the natural environment nor the human beings can survive in the

absence of the other. This interdependence relationship acts as a key reminder of the need for human beings to utilise the environment in a sustainable way. This will in turn help in the fulfilment of the SDG 15. Although the philosophy of Deuteronomy 20:19–20 is confined to control deforestation, the same verse can be extended to the prohibition of the needless wasting or the destruction of both living and non-living things.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the contribution of Dr Conrad Chibango who is the Senior lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, School of Heritage Studies and Education, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe. The author relied more upon Dr Chibango who clarifies the expectations of the journal and continuously communicates on the timelines of the article. He would make constant checkups regarding the progress of the article from the onset until the submission date.

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

Author's contributions

M.M. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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