



Volume: 1 | Issue: 1 | Month–Year: July 2026

ISSN: 3139-8510

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Imago Dei and Ecological Responsibility: An Exegetical Study of Genesis 1:26-27 and 2:15 in the Context of Africa's Climate Crisis

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Received: 16th May 2026

Revised: 5th June 2026

Published: July 2026

Keywords:

Genesis; imago Dei; ecological responsibility; climate justice; African eco-theology; Ubuntu/Umunthu; creation care

Abstract

This article offers an exegetical and contextual reading of Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:15 in response to the ecological and climate crises affecting Africa. It argues that the imago Dei should not be interpreted as a mandate for human superiority, domination, or unrestricted exploitation of the earth. Rather, the image of God calls human beings into responsible participation within God's community of creation. Through an examination of the substantial, relational, and functional interpretations of the imago Dei, the study shows that human capacity to reason, relate, and act must be directed toward care, justice, and the safeguarding of life. Genesis 2:15 strengthens this reading by presenting human vocation as service, cultivation, and protection. In the Af-

rican context, where climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and ecological vulnerability threaten communities and ecosystems, the biblical witness offers a theological basis for climate justice, ecological responsibility, and the renewal of life-giving relationships among God, humanity, and the whole creation.

1. Introduction

The ecological crisis is one of the most urgent moral, spiritual, and social challenges of the present age. Africa, though historically contributing far less to the causes of global climate change than industrialised regions, is among the continents most severely affected by its consequences. Droughts, floods, soil degradation, biodiversity loss, pollution, food insecurity, and forced migration increasingly threaten the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable communities. In this context, Christian theology cannot remain confined to abstract reflection. It must ask how Scripture can inspire faithful action, ecological conversion, and justice for communities and ecosystems under threat.

This article examines Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:15 as foundational biblical texts for ecological responsibility. The discussion is especially concerned with the meaning of the *imago Dei*, traditionally translated as the image of God. In many interpretations, the image of God has been connected with human dignity, reason, relationality, and vocation. However, when linked uncritically with dominion, it has sometimes been used to justify human superiority over the rest of creation. Such readings have contributed, directly or indirectly, to ecological attitudes that treat the earth as an object for human consumption rather than as God's living creation.

The central argument of this article is that the *imago Dei* is not a licence for domination but a summons to responsible, relational, and life-affirming participation in God's creation. Genesis 2:15 complements Genesis 1:26-27 by defining the human vocation as tilling and keeping the garden. The verbs suggest service, care, protection, and preservation. Read together, these texts call human beings to participate in the flourishing of creation, not to exploit it. In the African context, this biblical vision can strengthen theologies of life, community, and climate justice.

2. Methodology

The study employs a biblical-exegetical and contextual theological method. First, it examines the literary and theological context of Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:15. Secondly, it analyses the language and major interpretive traditions associated with the *imago Dei*, especially the substantial, relational, and functional views. Thirdly, it reads these texts in dialogue with African ecological realities, particularly the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and

pollution. Finally, it proposes theological implications for churches, theological education, and public witness in Africa.

The method is therefore not merely historical or textual. It is also hermeneutical and contextual. Scripture is read in relation to the cries of the earth and the cries of vulnerable communities. Such a reading is necessary for a journal committed to climate justice, because biblical interpretation becomes transformative when it addresses the real suffering of people, creatures, and ecosystems.

3. The Biblical Texts

Genesis 1:26-27 reads:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Genesis 2:15 reads:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

These passages are often read separately, but they are theologically connected. Genesis 1:26-27 speaks of human identity and vocation within creation. Genesis 2:15 clarifies the character of that vocation as service, cultivation, and protection. Together, they present humanity as accountable before God for the well-being of the earth.

4. Context of Genesis 1:26-27 and 2:15

The book of Genesis belongs to the Pentateuch and deals with beginnings: the beginning of creation, humanity, community, covenant, and the relationship between God and the world. The first creation account (Gen. 1:1-2:3) presents the ordered unfolding of creation through divine speech. The second creation account (Gen. 2:4-25) presents a more intimate picture of humanity placed within the garden. Both accounts affirm that the world is God's creation and that humanity exists within, not outside, the created order.

Genesis 1:26-27 is located within the wider narrative of creation. It follows the creation of light, sky, land, vegetation, heavenly bodies, sea creatures, birds, and animals. Humanity appears within this larger community of life. This sequence is theologically important. Human beings are not the creators of the world; they enter a world already called good by God. The earth does not begin with humanity, nor does its value depend solely on human use.

Genesis 2:15 deepens this understanding. The human being is placed in the garden not as an absentee owner, but as one called to work and preserve it. The garden is a place of gift and responsibility. The human vocation is therefore neither idleness nor exploitation, but participation in the care of God's earth.

5. Literary Structure

Genesis 1:26-27 may be read through the following structure:

A. God's declaration concerning the nature of humanity: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (v. 26a).

B. God's declaration concerning the vocation of humanity: "Let them have dominion" (v. 26b).

A'. God's creation of humanity, male and female, in the divine image (v. 27).

The structure shows that identity and vocation belong together. What human beings are before God shapes what they are called to do within creation. Genesis 2:15 then provides a practical description of that vocation: to till and to keep. In ecological interpretation, these two verbs are crucial because they prevent dominion from being understood as domination.

6. Exegetical Analysis of Genesis 1:26-27

6.1 "Let us make humankind"

The creation of humanity begins with divine speech. Unlike the earlier creative commands, the phrase "Let us make" has a deliberative tone. Interpreters have understood the plural in different ways: as a reference to the divine council, as a royal plural, or, in Christian theological interpretation, as suggestive of the fullness of God. Whatever view one adopts, the text clearly presents humanity as created by God and accountable to God.

The Hebrew term often translated as "man" may refer to humankind collectively. Therefore, the text should not be read as referring only to male humanity. Genesis 1:27 explicitly states that male and female are created in the image of God. This affirmation has ethical importance: both men and women share equal dignity and equal responsibility within the community of creation.

6.2 "In our image, according to our likeness"

The *imago Dei* has been interpreted in several major ways throughout Christian tradition. Three interpretations are especially significant: the substantial, relational, and functional views. Each offers insight, but each must be handled carefully in ecological theology.

The substantial view identifies the image of God with certain human capacities such as reason, moral awareness, or spiritual nature. This view rightly recognises that human beings possess

reflective and moral capacities. However, when isolated from relational and ecological responsibility, it may encourage a view of humans as superior beings separated from the rest of creation. Such a reading can become anthropocentric and may weaken the biblical vision of interdependence.

The relational view understands the image of God in terms of relationships: with God, with other humans, and with the wider creation. This interpretation is particularly fruitful for ecological theology. It resonates with African concepts such as Ubuntu or Umunthu, which emphasise that personhood is formed in relationship. A person is not truly human in isolation. In ecological terms, humanity is not complete apart from the earth community that sustains life.

The functional view interprets the image of God in terms of human vocation, especially the exercise of dominion. This view is important because Genesis 1:26 links image and vocation. However, it becomes dangerous when dominion is read as domination. A climate justice reading must insist that any human function within creation is accountable to God and directed toward the flourishing of life.

A balanced interpretation recognises that these three views are complementary. Human beings image God as reasoning, relational, and responsible creatures. Reason must not become control; relationship must not become self-interest; function must not become domination. The imago Dei becomes authentic when humanity reflects God's justice, compassion, care, and life-giving love toward all creation.

6.3 "Let them have dominion"

The phrase "let them have dominion" has been one of the most contested expressions in ecological interpretation. The Hebrew verb *radah* can carry meanings associated with rule or governance. However, in biblical theology, human rule is never independent of God's rule. Dominion belongs first to God. Humanity exercises responsibility only as a creaturely and accountable participant in God's world.

Dominion must therefore be distinguished from domination. Domination treats the earth as an object for exploitation. Biblical dominion, read through Genesis 2:15, is better understood as responsible care, service, protection, and justice. It does not give human beings the right to destroy habitats, pollute rivers, exhaust soils, or consume without restraint. Such actions contradict the character of the Creator whose image humanity bears.

Psalms 8:3-8 also speaks of humanity being crowned with glory and honour and given responsibility over the works of God's hands. Yet this glory is not self-exaltation. It is a delegated responsibility within God's creation. The question, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" reminds humanity of humility, not arrogance.

6.4 “Male and female he created them”

Genesis 1:27 affirms that male and female together bear the image of God. Human identity is therefore communal from the beginning. The text rejects any interpretation that restricts divine image-bearing to one gender, class, race, or group. In the African context, this has implications for ecological justice because women, children, Indigenous peoples, farmers, fisherfolk, and the poor often bear disproportionate burdens of ecological degradation and climate change. A theology of the *imago Dei* must therefore defend the dignity of vulnerable people while also recognising their wisdom and agency in ecological healing.

7. Exegetical Analysis of Genesis 2:15

Genesis 2:15 states that God placed the human being in the garden “to till it and keep it.” This verse is central to a biblical ecological ethic. The garden is not a possession to be consumed; it is a sacred trust to be served and protected.

The verb commonly translated “to till” also carries the sense of work or service. It may even suggest a priestly dimension of service before God. Human labour in the garden is therefore not merely economic activity; it is a form of service within God’s creation. The verb translated “to keep” includes the meanings of guarding, preserving, watching, and protecting. Together, the two verbs describe a vocation of active care and protective responsibility.

This verse corrects exploitative readings of Genesis 1:26. If dominion is interpreted without Genesis 2:15, it may be distorted into control. When read together, however, the human vocation becomes clear: humanity is called to serve and safeguard the earth. The garden becomes a symbol of the whole earth, and Edenic responsibility becomes a continuing moral calling.

8. Theological Analysis: Toward Biblical Ecological Transformation in Africa

The exegetical reading above yields several theological affirmations. First, God is the Creator and owner of the earth. Neither angels nor human beings own creation. Secondly, humanity bears the image of God and is therefore called to reflect God’s character in relation to creation. Thirdly, human vocation is defined by service and protection, not exploitation. Fourthly, creation is a community of life in which human beings are deeply interdependent with other creatures.

These affirmations are highly relevant to Africa’s climate crisis. Across the continent, communities experience the effects of drought, flooding, deforestation, polluted water, declining biodiversity, and food insecurity. These are not only environmental issues; they are matters of

justice. The people who suffer most are often those least responsible for the causes. Climate justice therefore requires both ecological renewal and social transformation.

8.1 A Theology of Life

God is the God of life. The creation narratives present a world filled with divine generosity: light, water, land, plants, animals, and human beings are woven together in a living order. A theology of life affirms that every creature has value before God and that the flourishing of humanity is inseparable from the flourishing of the earth.

This theology challenges destructive development models that sacrifice forests, rivers, animals, and vulnerable communities for short-term profit. In Africa, where many communities depend directly on land, water, forests, and biodiversity, ecological destruction is also an attack on life. The imago Dei calls human beings to choose life, defend life, and build social systems that sustain life.

8.2 A Theology of Community

The biblical vision of creation is communal. Genesis 1 repeatedly declares creation good before humanity is created. Genesis 9 extends God's covenant not only to Noah and his descendants but also to every living creature. This wider covenantal vision prevents human beings from seeing themselves as the sole centre of God's concern.

African concepts of Ubuntu/Umunthu can enrich this biblical vision. Personhood is realised through relationship, mutual care, and responsibility. In ecological terms, humanity becomes truly human when it lives in right relationship with God, neighbour, land, water, animals, and future generations. Climate injustice is therefore a rupture of community: it damages the bonds that hold life together.

8.3 From Stewardship to Mutual Custodianship

The language of stewardship has often been used to describe human responsibility for creation. It can be helpful when it emphasises accountability to God and care for the earth. However, it can also be misunderstood as a hierarchical model in which humans stand above the rest of creation as managers or owners. For a climate justice framework, the language of mutual custodianship, sacred partnership, and participation in the community of creation is more relational and less anthropocentric.

Mutual custodianship recognises that human beings care for creation, but also depend on creation's care. Trees give oxygen, rivers sustain life, soil nourishes crops, insects pollinate plants, and animals maintain ecological balance. Humanity is not above this web of life; humanity belongs within it. The imago Dei should therefore be understood not as privilege over creation but as responsibility within creation.

8.4 Climate Justice and African Vulnerability

Climate justice requires attention to unequal responsibility and unequal suffering. Many African communities face severe climate impacts despite contributing relatively little to historic greenhouse gas emissions. This raises moral questions about ecological debt, global responsibility, adaptation finance, and the rights of vulnerable communities. Biblical theology must speak to these realities.

Genesis 1:26-27 and 2:15 do not provide technical climate policy, but they provide a moral and theological foundation. If the earth belongs to God, then no nation, corporation, or generation has the right to destroy it for private gain. If human beings bear the image of God, then the dignity of climate-affected communities must be protected. If humanity is called to till and keep the garden, then ecological destruction is a violation of divine vocation.

9. Implications for Churches, Theological Education, and Public Witness

The churches in Africa have an important role in responding to the climate crisis. First, they must teach ecological theology as an essential part of Christian discipleship. Creation care should not be treated as an optional concern but as part of faithfulness to the Creator. Sermons, Bible studies, liturgies, youth programmes, and theological curricula should integrate ecological responsibility and climate justice.

Secondly, theological institutions should train clergy and lay leaders to interpret Scripture in ways that respond to ecological realities. Biblical studies, ethics, pastoral theology, and mission studies should engage the environmental crisis as a central issue of Christian witness.

Thirdly, churches should model practical ecological responsibility. This includes tree planting, water conservation, waste reduction, sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, protection of biodiversity, and advocacy for communities affected by climate change. Such practices should not be symbolic only; they should become part of the church's public discipleship.

Finally, churches must raise a prophetic voice for climate justice. They should stand with communities affected by floods, droughts, pollution, land degradation, and displacement. They should also call governments, industries, and global institutions to act justly, reduce emissions, protect ecosystems, and support adaptation in vulnerable regions.

10. Conclusion

This article has argued that Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:15 provide a strong biblical foundation for ecological responsibility and climate justice. The *imago Dei* should not be understood as a claim to human domination, but as a vocation to reflect God's care, justice, and life-giving love within creation. Human beings image God when they reason wisely, relate justly, and act responsibly toward the whole earth community.

Genesis 2:15 clarifies the nature of this vocation: humanity is called to till and keep the garden. This means serving, cultivating, guarding, and preserving the earth. In Africa, where ecological degradation and climate change threaten both people and ecosystems, this biblical mandate has urgent relevance. The churches are called to nurture a theology of life, a theology of community, and a practice of mutual custodianship.

The climate crisis is not only a scientific or political crisis; it is also a spiritual and moral crisis. It reveals broken relationships with God, neighbour, the earth, and future generations. A renewed reading of the imago Dei can help the church recover its vocation: to participate humbly and courageously in God's healing of creation.

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