NIU Journal of Humanities Copyright©2026
Nexus International University ISSN: *3007-1704;* 11(1): 125-134

The Tree of Prohibition and the Theology of Limits: Genesis 2:9, 16-17 and Contemporary Eco-Ethical Responsibility

JOHN CLERK KOKO, GOKA M. MPIGI
Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Abstract. This study examines the prohibition concerning the tree in the midst of the garden in Genesis 2:9, 16-17 and how this could form a basis for a theology of limit intrinsic to creation. While eco-theological discourse has largely focused on constructive dominion in Genesis 1, this paper contends that the prohibition regarding the tree in Genesis 2 provides a foundational paradigm for understanding creaturely responsibility. Using the methodology of theological exegesis, the study engages key biblical scholars like Walter Brueggemann, Gordon J. Wenham, and Claus Westermann to examine the literary centrality of the tree, the structure of generous permission and singular prohibition, and the anthropological significance of humanity formed from the soil. Their insights illuminate how freedom in the garden is bounded by divine command. In constructive dialogue with Jürgen Moltmann and Sallie McFague, the paper argues that limit is not punitive but constitutive of creatureliness. The tree functions as a visible sign of non-absolute human access, thus grounding ecological responsibility in restraint, relationality, and reverent participation within the ordered creation.

Keywords: Ecological crisis, Tree of Prohibition, Theology of Limits, Eco-Theology, Responsibility, and Creatureliness.

1. Introduction

The seriousness of the ecological crisis of the twenty-first century evidenced in climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution, and unsustainable patterns of production and consumption has compelled renewed theological reflection on the human responsibility within creation. Christian eco-theology has increasingly turned to the Genesis creation narratives to reassess the moral and spiritual foundations of humanity's relationship with the earth. Historically, much of this discussion has centered on Genesis 1:26–28, particularly the mandate to "have dominion" and "subdue" the earth. These texts have been interpreted both as contributing to ecological exploitation and as providing a basis for responsible stewardship (White, 1967; Bauckham, 2010; Moltmann, 1985; Koko, 2018; Koko & Akionla, 2024). While this debate remains important, it has often overshadowed the theological significance of Genesis 2 especially the prohibition concerning the tree in the midst of the garden (Gen 2:9, 16–17).

Contrary to the mandate for dominion, emerges another portrayal of humanity formed from the ground and placed within a cultivated garden and instructed to till and keep it (Gen. 2:15), suggesting relational responsibility and participatory care (Davis, 2009; Fretheim, 2005). Notably, the narrative juxtaposes divine generosity with divinely instituted restraint. In this restraint, human is permitted to eat freely from every tree of the garden, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which remains prohibited (Gen 2:16-17). The structure of the command embeds limitation within abundance. Traditional interpretations have largely understood this prohibition in moral, anthropological, or epistemological terms, emphasizing obedience, free will, or the quest for autonomy (Westermann, 1984; Wenham, 1987). While these readings are theologically substantial, they often neglect the ecological implications of a divinely established boundary within creation itself.

The current study contends that this prohibition mandate articulates more than a moral test; it encodes a theological vision in which limit and restraint are constitutive of human flourishing. The relative underdevelopment of this passage within eco-theological discourse constitutes a significant scholarly gap. While eco-theology has critiqued anthropocentrism and reinterpreted dominion language (Habel, 2000; Bauckham, 2010), less attention has been given to how Genesis 2 frames human vocation through prohibition and boundary. In a global context marked by extractive economies, consumerist excess, and technocratic paradigms that

disregard ecological limits (Francis, 2015), retrieving a biblical theology of limits is both timely and necessary.

The significance of this research is that it shifts eco-theological reflection from the question of power to the question of restraint. By rereading the "tree in the midst" as a symbolic marker of creaturely finitude and divine sovereignty, the study proposes that ecological responsibility is grounded not merely in stewardship but in obedience to divinely instituted boundaries. Such a perspective contributes to ongoing theological efforts to cultivate ecological humility, reverence, and accountability within creation (Moltmann, 1985; Bauckham, 2010). Methodologically, this paper employs a canonical-theological exegesis of Genesis 2:9, 16–17, attentive to literary structure, key Hebrew expressions, and narrative theology, while engaging contemporary eco-theological scholarship. Through an eco-hermeneutical rereading, it develops a constructive synthesis centered on the concept of a "theology of limits." By so doing, the study seeks to fill a critical lacuna in biblical eco-theology by demonstrating that the prohibition narrative offers a foundational paradigm for contemporary eco-theological responsibility.

2. Concept of Ecological Crisis and the Imperative of Ecological Responsibility

The contemporary ecological crisis represents one of the most far-reaching and destabilizing challenges in human history. Manifested in climate change, biodiversity collapse, deforestation, ocean acidification, soil degradation, freshwater scarcity, and escalating pollution, the crisis is not merely environmental but civilizational in scope. It raises fundamental questions about humanity's place within the natural order, the moral limits of technological power, and the ethical responsibilities that accompany human agency. The seriousness of the crisis lies not only in its empirical scale but in its theological, philosophical, and anthropological implications.

A decisive moment in modern discourse on ecology and religion occurred with the publication of Lynn White Jr.'s seminal article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (1967). White argued that Western Christianity, particularly in its Latin medieval forms, contributed to ecological degradation by desacralizing nature and legitimizing human dominion over it. Within this context, the biblical mandate to "subdue" and "have dominion" over the earth in Genesis 1 fostered an anthropocentric worldview that elevated human interests above the intrinsic value of non-human creation (White, 1967). Although his thesis has been extensively critiqued and nuanced, it catalyzed an enduring debate about the theological roots of environmental exploitation. White's intervention compelled theologians to reexamine scriptural interpretation, doctrinal anthropology, and the moral logic of dominion. Following Whte's analysis, some critics have argued that he oversimplified the Christian tradition and neglected strands within biblical theology that affirm the goodness and integrity of creation (Bauckham, 2010; Santmire, 2000). Nevertheless, White's central insight that religious worldviews shape ecological behavior remains influential. If theological imagination has historically contributed to environmental degradation, it may also serve as a resource for ecological renewal.

The seriousness of the ecological crisis is underscored by a number of empirical reports. For example, scientific consensus affirms that anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are driving global warming, resulting in rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and disruptions to ecosystems (IPCC, 2023). Biodiversity loss is occurring at rates unprecedented in human history, with species extinction accelerating due to habitat destruction, pollution, and climate change (IPBES, 2019). These developments are not isolated phenomena but interconnected symptoms of a broader pattern of unsustainable human activity. The ecological crisis is therefore not merely technical but structural. It is linked to economic systems predicated on perpetual growth, consumerist cultures that normalize excesses and technological paradigms that prioritize efficiency over restraint. It is in this light that Pope Francis identifies what he calls the "technocratic paradigm" as a dominant framework that assumes unlimited human control over nature and disregards intrinsic limits (Francis, 2015). Within such a paradigm, the natural world is reduced to raw material for production and consumption. Mpigi and Bob-Manuel (2025) observe that water which is an essential natural endowment meant for human survival and serves a crucial role in various aspects of ecological life, has also been used for agricultural purposes such as irrigation, crop growth and livestock production. In the industry, water is used for manufacturing goods, cooling systems and as a raw material. Water is also used in hydroelectric power generation; it is also used for recreational purposes such as swimming, boating and in the medical industry. In these processes, the water and environment are affected negatively. Conversely, ecological degradation becomes the predictable outcome of a worldview that confuses capability with legitimacy.

But beyond this, the seriousness of the crisis is further intensified by its disproportionate impact on

vulnerable populations. Environmental degradation exacerbates poverty, food insecurity, and displacement, particularly in regions already burdened by economic and political instability. Climate-induced droughts and floods undermine agricultural systems, threaten livelihoods, and heighten social tensions. Thus, ecological collapse intersects with issues of justice, equity, and human dignity (Northcott, 2007). Ecological responsibility cannot be separated from concern for the marginalized, as environmental harm often amplifies existing inequalities.

Theologically, the crisis exposes a distortion in humanity's self-understanding. Jürgen Moltmann argues that modernity has cultivated a conception of humanity as master and possessor of nature, severed from relational embeddedness within creation (Moltmann, 1985). This anthropological inflation fosters an illusion of autonomy that neglects dependence upon ecological systems. Also, when humanity forgets its creaturely status, it risks transforming technological power into unchecked domination. The ecological crisis thus reflects a crisis of limits: the failure to recognize boundaries inherent in both natural systems and human finitude. Richard Bauckham is therefore perfectly in order to contend that Scripture presents humanity not as isolated ruler but as participant within the "community of creation" (Bauckham, 2010). The biblical vision situates humans alongside other creatures under the sovereignty of God. This framework challenges anthropocentrism by affirming that non-human creation possesses value independent of instrumental utility. The erosion of such a vision contributes to ecological exploitation. If creation is perceived solely as resource, responsibility yields to consumption.

For Norman Habel and the Earth Bible project, biblical interpretation must recover the voice and agency of Earth itself, resisting readings that marginalize non-human existence (Habel, 2000). Although their hermeneutical approach has generated debate, it underscores a growing recognition that ecological responsibility requires reexamining interpretive assumptions that privilege human dominance. The seriousness of the crisis demands not only policy reform but also hermeneutical and moral transformation.

Philosophically, the ecological crisis calls into question Enlightenment narratives of progress. The assumption that technological advancement necessarily entails moral advancement has proven indefensible. Holmes Rolston III observes that humanity has acquired unprecedented power without commensurate moral development, creating a perilous imbalance (Rolston, 1994). The capacity to manipulate ecosystems does not guarantee wisdom in their management. Therefore, ecological responsibility that entails cultivating virtues of prudence, humility, and restraint is urgently needed to address this situation.

By ecological responsibility, we are referring to the moral obligation to preserve the integrity, stability, and flourishing of Earth's systems for present and future generations. This responsibility is grounded in several interrelated principles. First, interdependence meaning that human well-being is inseparable from the health of ecosystems. Second, justice implying that environmental harms disproportionately affect the poor and unborn. Third, stewardship or trusteeship inferring that human agency entails accountability to a transcendent moral order; and fourth, precaution which means that actions with potentially catastrophic consequences demand careful restraint.

According to Pope Francis, ecological responsibility is "care for our common home," integrating environmental concern with social and spiritual renewal (Francis, 2015). He emphasizes that ecological conversion involves more than regulatory compliance; it requires a transformation of desire and imagination. Similarly, Moltmann envisions a theology of creation that reorients humanity from domination toward participation in God's sustaining work (Moltmann, 1985). Such perspectives underscore that responsibility is not merely reactive but constructive.

The seriousness of the ecological crisis also lies in its temporal dimension. Environmental degradation often unfolds gradually, obscuring immediate consequences while accumulating long-term harm. This temporal lag complicates moral perception, as short-term benefits may mask future costs. Ecological responsibility therefore requires anticipatory ethics, that is, a willingness to act prudently in light of projected risks. The precautionary principle reflects this orientation, urging restraint when scientific uncertainty intersects with potential irreversible damage (Koko, 2018; Koko & Akionla, 2024). It is undeniable that pollution has accompanied mankind ever since groups of people first congregated and remained for a long time in any one place. Yet, this form of pollution that is characteristic of industrial societies is not only annoying but has serious health implications. Illustrating is that steady exposure to noise in excess can cause permanent loss of hearing. In addition to causing loss of hearing, there is some evidence that noise can produce other deleterious effects on human

health and on work performance. (Mpigi and Nwosu, 2026)

Moreover, ecological responsibility must be communal rather than exclusively individual. While personal lifestyle changes are significant, systemic transformation is indispensable. Policies regulating emissions, protecting biodiversity, and restructuring energy systems are essential components of collective responsibility. The crisis exceeds the capacity of isolated actors; it demands coordinated institutional response at local, national, and global levels.

Above all, it is safe to state that the ecological crisis is serious because it threatens the stability of Earth's life-support systems, exacerbates injustice, and reveals profound distortions in human self-understanding. From White's provocative thesis regarding theological complicity (White, 1967) to contemporary analyses of technocratic excess (Francis, 2015) and relational ontology (Bauckham, 2010; Moltmann, 1985), scholars and theologians converge on a central insight: ecological degradation is inseparable from moral and spiritual disorder. Ecological responsibility, therefore, entails more than technical remediation; it requires reconfiguring the narratives, values, and practices that govern human engagement with the natural world. Only through such comprehensive reorientation can humanity hope to address the depth and breadth of the crisis that now confronts the global community.

3. Contextual and Literary Exploration of the Tree in the Midst of the Garden

Contextually and structurally, the text Genesis 2:9, 16–17 occupies a central place within the garden narrative. This is because the text presents two named trees "in the midst of the garden" namely: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Interestingly, the description of the tree is followed by a divine command that combines expansive permission with a single prohibition in the text. The literary arrangement and theological logic of these verses suggest that the tree of prohibition functions not merely as narrative ornamentation but as a constitutive feature of human existence before God. For purpose of clarity, it is important to explore its literary context using understandable subthemes.

The Theological Significance and Meaning of Tree in the Midst of the Garden

One significant thing about the tree in the midst of the garden is the description accorded to it in the text. To be specific, Genesis 2:9 states thus:

…the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Etymologically, the phrase "in the midst" is translated from the Hebrew בְּתוֹךְ, *betok* and signals the special location of the tree. In biblical narrative, the "midst" often denotes a place of theological intensity, the locus of presence, encounter, or decision. The positioning of the trees at the center of the garden indicates that they are not peripheral but symbolically determinative for the human vocation within the narrative world. Claus Westermann observes that the naming of the two trees interrupts what would otherwise be a generalized description of the garden's fertility (Westermann, 1984). The narrative could have remained at the level of aesthetic and alimentary abundance; however, it deliberately singles out these two trees. Therefore, for Westermann, this narrative particularization indicates that the trees bear theological weight beyond botanical description. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, especially, is introduced in anticipation of the command that follows, thereby establishing a structural link between its special placement and divine speech.

A similar observation is made by Gordon J. Wenham who emphasizes that the placement of the trees "in the midst" heightens their narrative prominence (Wenham, 1987). Although Genesis 3:3 appears to associate the phrase particularly with the tree of knowledge, Wenham argues that Genesis 2:9 grammatically places both trees at the center. This centrality renders the trees unavoidable features of the human environment; they are not hidden or marginal but stand within the horizon of human awareness. The human creature is thus constituted as one who lives in proximity to both life and prohibition.

Walter Brueggemann on his part interprets the tree of knowledge as a "boundary marker" within the garden's ordered freedom (Brueggemann, 1982). Its location in the midst signifies that the human relationship to God is not structured by unmediated autonomy but by a visible, tangible limit. In this light, the central tree embodies the claim that creaturely life unfolds within a defined sphere established by divine will. Thus, the special place functions literarily to underscore theological meaning that at the heart of human habitation stands a sign of divine prerogative.

3.1 The Structure of Permission and Prohibition

Literary, Genesis 2:16–17 presents one of the most carefully structured divine commands in the Hebrew Bible:
You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

The structure is rhetorically significant. The command begins not with restriction but with expansive permission. The Hebrew construction in verse 16 employs the infinitive absolute with the imperfect *'ākōl tō'kēl* (you may surely eat or you shall freely eat) which intensifies the sense of generosity (Wenham, 1987). The doubling of the verb communicates emphatic allowance. As Westermann notes, the command opens with an unrestricted affirmation that frames the prohibition as secondary and derivative (Westermann, 1984). Only after this sweeping permission does the text introduce the adversative particle "but" that marks the single exception. The prohibition is grammatically and conceptually dependent upon the prior grant. Brueggemann underscores this ordering, arguing that the negative command is intelligible only within the context of abundance (Brueggemann, 1982). The human creature is not defined initially by what is withheld but by what is given.

This literary sequencing is theologically decisive. The prohibition does not negate freedom; it shapes it. Wenham remarks that the structure of the command demonstrates that the restriction is minimal in scope relative to the plenitude permitted (Wenham, 1987). The singularity of the prohibition, that is, one tree among many invariably heightens the asymmetry between gift and limit. The narrative thereby resists construing God as primarily restrictive; rather, the restriction functions as a delimitation within generosity.

Westermann interprets the prohibition as a necessary correlate of the divine–human relationship (Westermann, 1984). The implication is that without command, there would be no dialogical structure to human existence before God. The presence of a prohibition introduces the possibility of obedience, which in turn presupposes freedom. But this freedom is not self-grounding; it is conferred and bounded. In essence, it could be argued that the command situates the human creature within a field of responsibility that is inseparable from divine address.

3.2 Abundance and the Single Restriction

The juxtaposition of "every tree" with "the tree" accentuates the disproportion between abundance and restriction. Genesis 2:9 has already described the garden as containing "every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food." Verse 16 reiterates the comprehensiveness of the gift: "of every tree of the garden you may freely eat." Against this plenitude stands one named exception. Again, Brueggemann characterizes this narrative pattern as "limit within generosity" (Brueggemann, 1982). The single restriction signals that human life is neither marked by scarcity nor by absolute license. The creature inhabits a world that is richly provided yet not exhaustively available. The withholding of one tree establishes that not all possibilities are granted to the human agent.

Wenham draws attention to the way the prohibition sharpens narrative tension by isolating a specific object of desire (Wenham, 1987). The restriction's narrow scope intensifies its theological significance. If numerous trees were forbidden, the command might suggest deprivation. Instead, the singularity of the prohibition underscores that the limit is qualitative rather than quantitative. It concerns a specific kind of knowledge, "the knowledge of good and evil", which many scholars understand as an instruction denoting comprehensive moral discernment or autonomous judgment (Wenham, 1987; Westermann, 1984). Moreover, Westermann contends that the knowledge in question is not mere intellectual awareness but a claim to determine the boundaries of good and evil independently of divine command (Westermann, 1984). In this sense, the single restriction guards a domain that belongs uniquely to God. The human is permitted broad participation in the goods of creation, yet the authority to define ultimate moral order remains beyond creaturely grasp. The prohibition thus delineates a sphere of divine prerogative.

The abundance–restriction dynamic reveals that the narrative is not preoccupied with ascetic limitation but with ordered freedom. The single withheld tree is the sign that creaturely life is derivative and accountable. The restriction is minimal in material terms but maximal in theological import.

3.3 Freedom Bounded by Command

The command in Genesis 2:16–17 also establishes a paradoxical vision of freedom. On the one hand, the human is addressed as a responsible agent capable of obedience or disobedience. On the other hand, the parameters of action are clearly demarcated by divine speech. Freedom, therefore, is neither illusory nor

absolute; it is bounded. Commenting on this, Brueggemann argues that the prohibition discloses the "seriousness of creaturehood" (Brueggemann, 1982). This means that to be a creature is to live in responsive relation to the Creator. The command defines the human as one who hears and must decide. Yet the decision is framed within a limit that the creature does not establish. Autonomy in the sense of self-legislation is excluded; freedom is exercised within the order given by God.

Wenham notes that the threat of death attached to the prohibition -"you shall surely die" intensifies the gravity of the command (Wenham, 1987). The formula conveys certainty rather than immediacy, underscoring that the violation of the limit carries existential consequences. The narrative thereby integrates freedom and accountability. The human may transgress, but not without cost. For Westermann, the prohibition functions as a defining element of human existence before God (Westermann, 1984). Without limit, the human would not stand as creature distinct from Creator. The command demarcates the boundary between divine sovereignty and human agency. In refusing the fruit, the human acknowledges this distinction; in taking it, the human attempts to collapse it.

In all, the literary artistry of Genesis 2:9, 16–17 thus presents a world structured by gift and command. The trees in the midst are not incidental details but focal symbols around which the narrative's theology turns. The generous permission affirms the goodness and accessibility of creation, while the singular prohibition establishes a non-negotiable boundary. Together, they define freedom as participatory yet limited.

3.4 Limit as Intrinsic to Creatureliness

The cumulative effect of the position of the tree, rhetorical structure, and asymmetrical restriction is to introduce limit as intrinsic to creaturely existence. The human is placed within abundance but not granted ultimacy. The prohibition signifies that creatureliness entails acknowledgment of boundaries that one does not set. Brueggemann's reading highlights that the tree of knowledge marks "the boundary of human freedom" (Brueggemann, 1982). Wenham's exegetical attention to the grammar of permission underscores that this boundary operates within a broader context of generosity (Wenham, 1987). Westermann's theological analysis situates the prohibition within the fundamental distinction between Creator and creature (Westermann, 1984). Taken together, these scholars illuminate the literary and theological coherence of the passage.

It is important reiterate based on the above contextual and literary exploration that Genesis 2:9, 16–17 therefore does more than foreshadow transgression in Genesis 3. It establishes a structural principle: human life before God is constituted by freedom bounded by command. The tree in the midst stands as a visible sign that not everything within reach is within right. Limit is not an afterthought introduced by sin; it is present at the inception of human vocation. In this way, the narrative defines creatureliness as responsive, responsible, and restrained - a condition in which abundance is received as gift and freedom is exercised within divinely appointed bounds.

4. Conceptualizing the Theology of Limit in Creation

A theology of limit begins with the affirmation that creation is not an undifferentiated expanse but an ordered reality structured through divine intentionality. In the biblical witness, limit is neither deficiency nor punishment; it is constitutive of created existence. The opening chapters of Genesis portray a world brought into being and sustained through distinctions, separations, and boundaries. These limits are not imposed upon an otherwise autonomous reality but are intrinsic to the design of creation itself. To speak theologically of limit, therefore, is to speak of the form and measure through which creaturely life becomes possible.

The Priestly account in Genesis 1 presents divine creativity as an ordering activity achieved through separation. God separates light from darkness (Gen 1:4), waters above from waters below (1:6-7), sea from dry land (1:9-10), and day from night (1:14-18). Each act establishes boundaries that differentiate domains and assign functions. Claus Westermann observes that the emphasis in Genesis 1 falls not merely on origination but on the ordering of chaos into a structured cosmos (Westermann, 1984). The repeated pattern of separation indicates that distinction is essential to the goodness of creation. The refrain "and God saw that it was good" follows these structuring acts, suggesting that limit and goodness are inseparable.

Walter Brueggemann interprets the creation narrative as a testimony to God's sovereign ordering power, in which the world is given reliability through divinely established boundaries (Brueggemann, 1982). Without separation, light would collapse into darkness, waters would overwhelm the land, and temporal rhythms would dissolve into indistinction. Limit, therefore, is not negation but enablement. It is

the condition under which life can flourish. Theologically, the separations of Genesis 1 affirm that creation possesses measure, proportion, and differentiation as part of its design (Koko, 2018; Koko & Akionla, 2024).

The structuring role of limit extends beyond cosmology into anthropology. Genesis 2 offers a complementary account in which humanity is formed "from the dust of the ground" (*ʿadamah*) and animated by the divine breath (Gen 2:7). This portrayal underscores human earthiness and dependence. Gordon J. Wenham notes that the wordplay between *adam* (human) and *adamah* (ground) reinforces the intimate connection between humanity and soil (Wenham, 1987). Human life is not self-originating; it is drawn from and sustained by the earth. Such an origin situates humanity firmly within the created order rather than above it.

To be formed from soil is to be finite, contingent, and vulnerable. The human creature shares material continuity with the rest of creation. This earthbound identity signals that limit belongs to human nature. Humanity is neither divine nor self-sufficient but constituted by dependence upon both God and the ground. Westermann emphasizes that the formation narrative highlights creatureliness in its most concrete sense: humanity is shaped from dust and returns to dust (Westermann, 1984). Mortality itself becomes a sign of finitude inscribed within the human condition. Limit, therefore, is not introduced as retribution; it is present at the moment of formation.

Within this anthropological framework, the command concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:16-17) acquires theological depth. The divine instruction grants expansive permission: "you may freely eat of every tree of the garden", while designating a single exception. The structure of this command underscores generosity before restriction (Wenham, 1987). Yet the existence of even one prohibited tree establishes a boundary within human freedom. The tree stands as a visible, spatially located sign that human access to creation is not absolute. Brueggemann describes the tree of knowledge as a boundary marker that defines the limits of human autonomy (Brueggemann, 1982). Its presence "in the midst of the garden" (Gen 2:9) ensures that the human vocation unfolds in constant awareness of a divinely established restriction. Theologically, the tree signifies that not all possibilities available to human reach are granted to human right. The prohibition does not negate the goodness of the garden; rather, it preserves the distinction between Creator and creature.

Claus Westermann argues that the knowledge of good and evil refers to a comprehensive moral discernment that properly belongs to God (Westermann, 1984). The command thus delineates a sphere reserved for divine sovereignty. In refraining from the tree, the human acknowledges the boundary between creaturely participation and divine prerogative. The tree becomes the sacramental sign of that boundary—a concrete reminder that creaturely existence is circumscribed by divine wisdom.

Importantly, the presence of this limit precedes any act of disobedience. The prohibition is not a punitive measure in response to sin; it is embedded within the original ordering of the garden. This chronological priority is theologically decisive. Limit is part of design, not consequence. The narrative does not depict an initially limitless humanity subsequently restricted; rather, it portrays a humanity created within a structured field of freedom. Freedom itself is defined by relation to command.

The Sabbath motif further illuminates this theology of limit. God rests on the seventh day and sanctifies it (Gen 2:2-3), introducing a temporal boundary within the rhythm of creation. Work is affirmed as good, yet it is bounded by rest. The sanctification of time reinforces the principle that creaturely activity operates within divinely appointed limits. Here again, boundary is not punishment but blessing-an ordering of life that reflects divine intention.

The theology of limit, therefore, challenges notions of unbounded autonomy as the highest form of freedom (Koko, 2018; Koko & Akionla, 2024). In the Genesis narratives, measure and restraint are woven into the structure of reality. Creation thrives because waters remain within shores, days within cycles, and creatures within kinds. Humanity flourishes not by erasing limits but by inhabiting them faithfully.

In summary, the theology of limit in creation affirms that boundaries are intrinsic to the goodness and coherence of the world. The separations of Genesis 1 establish order; the formation of humanity from soil underscores finitude; and the tree in the midst of the garden serves as a visible sign that human access is not absolute. Together, these elements testify that limit is not a punitive constraint imposed after transgression but a constitutive feature of divine design. To be a creature is to exist within measure, to receive life as gift, to exercise freedom within command, and to acknowledge boundaries as the gracious form of created being.

5. Constructive Eco-Theological Implications for Contemporary Ecological Responsibility

The foregoing theological retrieval of limit within the doctrine of creation invites constructive engagement with contemporary eco-theology. If creation is structured by divinely instituted boundaries, and if human creatureliness is defined by finitude rather than autonomy, then ecological responsibility must be framed not merely as pragmatic management but as faithful participation within limits. Eco-theology, broadly conceived, seeks to articulate how Christian doctrines of God, creation, and humanity inform ethical responses to environmental degradation. Within this discourse, the recovery of limit as design offers a normative theological grammar for rethinking human agency in relation to the earth.

Lynn White Jr.'s well-known critique of Western Christianity argued that distorted theological interpretations contributed to exploitative attitudes toward nature (White, 1967). While subsequent scholarship has nuanced his claims, the broader eco-theological movement has recognized the necessity of doctrinal renewal. Jürgen Moltmann and Sallie McFague provide two influential yet distinct constructive trajectories that illuminate how a theology of limit may shape ecological responsibility.

The first trajectory by Jürgen Moltmann's theology of creation offers a decisive corrective to anthropocentric absolutism. In *God in Creation*, Moltmann argues that the modern ecological crisis reflects a metaphysical error: the transformation of humanity from creature within creation to master over it (Moltmann, 1985). Against this paradigm, he proposes a relational ontology in which all creatures exist within the indwelling presence of God. Creation is not an external object but the milieu of divine self-communication. Furthermore, for him, finitude is not a defect but a necessary condition of created existence. Every creature is limited in space, time, and power; these limits make relational coexistence possible. Without limit, there would be no differentiation; without differentiation, no community (Moltmann, 1985). In this sense, limit safeguards the integrity of each creature's sphere. The ecological crisis emerges when human beings transgress the limits of their creaturely vocation, confusing technical capacity with moral legitimacy.

Moltmann's emphasis on Sabbath further reinforces the theological significance of restraint. The Sabbath rest of God signifies the completion and affirmation of creation's goodness (Gen 2:2-3). For Moltmann, Sabbath embodies the cessation of acquisitive striving and the recognition of the world as gift rather than possession (Moltmann, 1985). Ecologically, this translates into patterns of life that resist endless productivity and consumption. Limit here becomes liturgical and ethical—a rhythm that interrupts domination. Moreover, Moltmann contends that true freedom is not unbounded autonomy but harmonious participation within God's created order. When humanity acknowledges its limits, it does not diminish its dignity; rather, it recovers its vocation as co-creator in responsive dependence. Ecological responsibility, therefore, entails the renunciation of absolutist claims over land, resources, and non-human life. It calls for self-restraint grounded in theological anthropology: humans are earth-creatures within God's community of life.

The second trajectory by Sallie McFague approaches ecological theology through the transformative power of metaphor. In works such as *The Body of God*, McFague argues that dominant theological metaphors have often reinforced hierarchical and dualistic understandings of the world (McFague, 1993). To address ecological crisis, she proposes alternative metaphors that reshape moral imagination. One of her most influential proposals is the metaphor of the world as "God's body." This image challenges the notion that creation is external to God and therefore expendable. If the world is imaginatively conceived as God's embodied presence, then harm inflicted upon ecosystems acquires theological gravity. While McFague does not intend the metaphor to collapse Creator and creation into identity, she insists that embodiment communicates intimacy, interdependence, and vulnerability (McFague, 1993). Within this framework, limit assumes a relational dimension. Bodies are finite; they require balance, nourishment, and rest. An embodied metaphor resists fantasies of infinite growth because biological systems operate within thresholds. McFague's emphasis on embodiment underscores that human beings, too, are bodily creatures embedded in material networks. The soil from which humanity is formed (Gen 2:7) becomes not merely origin but ongoing condition. Ecological responsibility thus arises from recognition of shared embodiment within a fragile, interconnected system.

McFague also critiques economic and cultural narratives that sacralize consumption. In her view, the ecological crisis is sustained by metaphors of domination and accumulation that normalize excess (McFague, 2008). A renewed theological imagination must therefore cultivate images that privilege sufficiency over surplus and communion over control.

Here, the theology of limit intersects with metaphorical reorientation: by envisioning the world as God's body, moral perception shifts from exploitation to care.

Bringing Moltmann and McFague into conversation yields a constructive ecological ethic grounded in limit as design. Moltmann provides ontological depth: creation is a differentiated community sustained by divine presence, and finitude structures each creature's role. McFague contributes imaginative transformation: metaphors shape how humans perceive their place within that community. Together, they challenge anthropocentric absolutism and invite measured participation rather than unrestrained appropriation.

In light of the theology of limit articulated in Genesis, ecological responsibility emerges as obedience to the structural boundaries of creation. The separations of Genesis 1, the formation of humanity from soil in Genesis 2, and the presence of the tree as a sign of non-absolute access collectively witness to a world designed with measure. Eco-theology, informed by Moltmann's relational ontology and McFague's embodied metaphors, translates this biblical insight into contemporary ethical vision.

Limit, therefore, is neither deprivation nor punishment. It is the form of creaturely flourishing. When acknowledged, it sustains balance and community; when denied, it generates disorder. By implication, the theology of limit calls for patterns of life that honor finitude, respect boundaries, and participate gratefully within the given structures of creation.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has argued that Genesis 2:9, 16-17 discloses a theology of limit embedded within the very structure of creation. Through divine separations, humanity's formation from soil, and the tree in the midst as a visible sign of non-absolute access, the biblical narrative presents limit not as punishment but as design. Creaturely freedom is real, yet bounded; generous, yet accountable. The command concerning the tree introduces restraint as intrinsic to human vocation, safeguarding the distinction between Creator and creature. When this boundary is ignored, disorder follows, not because limit is imposed belatedly, but because it is constitutive of flourishing. In a time marked by ecological destabilization, this theological retrieval is not abstract speculation but moral necessity. The refusal of limit manifested in extractive economies, unsustainable consumption, and technocratic excess has intensified environmental degradation and social vulnerability. Reclaiming limit as gift can reorient human agency from domination to measured participation. Accordingly, the study recommends the following as necessary for ecological responsibility in contemporary society:

Integration of theological education on creation and restraint within faith communities to advance responsible ecological citizenship in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) on quality education.

Promotion of sustainable consumption and production patterns grounded in moral restraint in line with SDG 12.
Active participation in climate action initiatives that acknowledge planetary boundaries in line with SDG 13; and
Collaborative partnerships among religious, civic, and policy institutions to protect terrestrial ecosystems in line with SDG 15 and SDG 17.

References

Bauckham, R. (2010). *Bible and ecology: Rediscovering the community of creation*. Baylor University Press.

Brueggemann, W. (1982). *Genesis* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching). John Knox Press.

Davis, E. F. (2009). *Scripture, culture, and agriculture: An agrarian reading of the Bible*. Cambridge University Press.

Francis. (2015). *Laudato si': On care for our common home*. Vatican Press.

Fretheim, T. E. (2005). *God and world in the Old Testament: A relational theology of creation*. Abingdon Press.

Habel, N. C. (Ed.). (2000). *Readings from the perspective of Earth*. Sheffield Academic Press.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2023). *Climate change 2023: Synthesis report*. IPCC.

Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. (2019). *Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services*. IPBES.

Koko, J.C. and Akinola, O.M. (2024). Christians' eco-theological perspective of the ecological crisis in the Niger-Delta and its implications for sustainable development, *IAUE Journal of Universal Research* (IJUR), 3 (2), Pp. 100-111.

Koko, J.C. (2018). Religion and the ecological problem: From Dominionism to Protectionism. *AKSU DIACONIA: Journal of Religion and Culture*, Pp. 290-301

McFague, S. (1993). *The body of God: An ecological theology*. Fortress Press.

McFague, S. (2008). *A new climate for theology: God, the world, and global warming*. Fortress Press.

Moltmann, J. (1985). *God in creation: A new theology of creation and the Spirit of God*. SCM Press.

Mpigi, G. M and Bob-Manuel, L. F (2025) Therapeutic Potency of the "Holy Mud and Water" in Selected African Initiated Churches in Rivers State, Nigeria. *NIU Journal of the Social Sciences 11(2), 247-254*

Mpigi, G.M and Nwosu, E. E (2026), Relooking Industrialization, Species and Cultural Extinction through the Lens of the Ogoniland, Nigeria. *AKSU Diakonia; Akwa Ibom State University Journal of Religion and Culture*

Northcott, M. S. (2007). *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*. Orbis Books.

Rolston, H., III. (1994). *Conserving Natural Value*. Columbia University Press.

Santmire, H. P. (2000). *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Fortress Press.

Wenham, G. J. (1987). *Genesis 1-15* (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 1). Word Books.

Westermann, C. (1984). *Genesis 1-11: A commentary*. Augsburg Publishing House.

White, L., Jr. (1967). The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis. *Science, 155*(3767), 1203-1207.