

**TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE HEBREW CONCEPT OF שומר: ITS
ENGLISH INTERPRETATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR
ECOLOGICAL STEWARDSHIP IN NIGERIA**

SAMUEL OLUWASEGUN KOLADE
Glorious Vision University, Ogwa

ABSTRACT

The Hebrew term שומר (*shomér*), often rendered “keeper,” “guardian,” or “watchman,” carries profound theological and ethical significance within the Hebrew Bible, encompassing personal, communal, and ecological responsibilities. While scholarship has examined its lexical range, little attention has been given to how the translation nuances influence ecological ethics—particularly within Nigerian Christian contexts facing severe environmental degradation. This study addresses that gap by critically analysing *shomér* in key biblical passages, evaluating English translations (e.g., NIV, ESV, NRSV), and exploring their theological implications for stewardship. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, combining close textual analysis and comparative translation studies. Findings indicate that variations in translation significantly shape theological constructs of stewardship, with some versions emphasizing passive care and others active, relational guardianship. These distinctions have practical implications for framing indigenous Nigerian eco-theologies. The study concludes that a linguistically informed understanding of *shomér* can deepen theological engagement with ecological issues, fostering stewardship models that are both biblically faithful and contextually relevant. The study recommends integrating translation awareness, *shomér*-based stewardship, and interdisciplinary collaboration in theology and environmental practice.

KEYWORDS: שומר(*shomér*), Stewardship, Biblical Translation, Eco-theology, and Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew word שומר(*shomér*), frequently translated as “keeper,” “guardian,” or “watchman,” carries profound theological and ethical dimensions within the biblical corpus. In Israel’s ancient tradition, the concept embodies layered

responsibilities, extending from individual protection to collective safeguarding and, importantly, to the stewardship of land and creation. Within the Hebrew Bible, שׁוֹמֵר (shomer) appears in multiple contexts and often intersects with related terms such as נֹצֵר (notser, “preserver”) and רֹעֶה (ro’eh, “shepherd”), demonstrating a rich and interconnected semantic field. This intertextual overlap presents a persistent challenge for translators, whose choices in rendering שׁוֹמֵר into English significantly shape theological interpretations and contemporary ecological reflection.

Although much scholarly work has examined the lexical scope of שׁוֹמֵר, relatively little has focused on the critical interplay between translation choices and their implications for ecological ethics. This gap becomes especially relevant in the Nigerian context, where ongoing environmental crises demand theological perspectives that meaningfully integrate scriptural categories with local ecological realities.

The present research sets out to investigate the textual and translational dimensions of שׁוֹמֵר in selected biblical passages, with particular attention to how English versions convey the term and how these renderings bear on the development of a theology of ecological stewardship in Nigeria. The study aims at exploring the semantic breadth and contextual deployment of שׁוֹמֵר across the Hebrew Bible. It also evaluates the accuracy and theological resonance of its translation in major English Bibles (e.g., NIV, ESV, NRSV) and reflects on how such insights can inform an indigenous ecological ethic that engages Nigeria’s pressing socio-environmental concerns.

Methodologically, the study applies a qualitative framework, combining close reading of the Hebrew text with comparative translation analysis and hermeneutical reflection. Core passages containing שׁוֹמֵר will be studied alongside their English renderings to reveal the translational tendencies and theological emphases embedded in these versions. Engagement with theological and ecological literature will further enable dialogue between biblical insight and contemporary stewardship practice.

The scope of the study is limited to biblical usages of שׁוֹמֵר and their English translations, considered in light of their ecological significance. Contextually, the research is anchored in Nigeria, where issues such as deforestation, soil depletion, and loss of biodiversity underscore the urgency of integrating biblical stewardship into ecological praxis. In doing so, the study contributes to translation studies and eco-theology by demonstrating how linguistic nuance shapes theological discourse and environmental responsibility. This will ultimately equip Nigerian churches,

theologians, and activists with a biblically grounded and contextually resonant vision of stewardship that unites scriptural heritage with ecological action.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF שומר SHOMER

The Hebrew root שׁמר (*sh-m-r*) essentially conveys the ideas of “keeping,” “guarding,” “watching,” and “preserving.” From this root comes the noun שׁומר (*shomer*), commonly translated as “keeper,” “watchman,” “guardian,” or “caretaker” (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1907). Within the Hebrew Bible, this term is used in diverse contexts that express both tangible roles and more abstract, moral responsibilities.

The semantic field of שׁומר spans a wide range—from very practical duties, such as a sentinel posted to defend a city (Nehemiah 4:9) or a shepherd protecting sheep (Psalm 23:1), to theological applications such as God being portrayed as Israel’s divine “keeper” (Psalm 121:5) or humanity charged with the task of “keeping” the land and covenant (Genesis 2:15). This range reveals a complex understanding of stewardship, uniting themes of vigilance, responsibility, and care (Waltke & O’Connor, 1990).

Several passages demonstrate the importance of this term. Genesis 2:15 introduces humanity’s responsibility in Eden: God commands Adam to “work” and “keep (שמר)” the garden. The verse stresses cultivation coupled with protective care, laying a biblical foundation for ecological ethics (Kearney, 2007). In Psalm 121:5, God Himself is named as the שׁומר, “the LORD is your keeper,” presenting divine guardianship as a model for human stewardship (Tigay, 1996). Nehemiah 4:9 reveals a communal application: the people “set a guard (שמר) day and night” while praying, embodying both vigilance and divine dependence (Smith, 1993). Proverbs 27:23 extends this to economic and ethical responsibility, urging careful oversight of flocks—an agrarian metaphor for attentive, sustainable care (Sweeney, 2005). Finally, Isaiah 62:6 employs the plural שׁומרים, describing watchmen on Jerusalem’s walls who persist in prayer and prophetic witness, highlighting moral and spiritual guardianship (Brueggemann, 1998).

The broader biblical vocabulary reinforces and enriches this theme. The word נֹצֵר (*notser*), often rendered “preserver” or “protector,” emphasizes ongoing preservation. In Psalm 16:5, God is addressed as the one who “preserves” life (Waltke & O’Connor, 1990). The related term רֹעֶה (*ro’eh*), “shepherd,” carries pastoral connotations of nurture, guidance, and care, famously captured in Psalm 23

(Alter, 2007). Likewise, the verb תִּצַּח (tzafah), “to watch” or “to keep lookout,” parallels שׂוֹמֵר in the role of a sentinel, especially in texts such as Ezekiel 3:17 and Nehemiah 4:9 (Gray, 1979). Taken together, these words form a rich theological lexicon of guardianship that integrates community protection, covenant faithfulness, and ecological care (Wright, 2004). Among them, however, *shomer* most fully embodies the dimension of protective stewardship over creation.

English translations render שׂוֹמֵר with notable variation. Versions like the ESV and NASB employ a formal equivalence approach, preserving terms such as “keeper,” “guardian,” and “watchman.” This maintains lexical closeness to the Hebrew root and allows readers to perceive its broad range (Liddell & Scott, 1996). By contrast, dynamic equivalence translations such as the NIV or NLT often prefer context-driven alternatives, seeking readability and relevance rather than strict lexical fidelity.

These translation choices significantly influence theological emphasis. The word “keeper,” for instance, highlights continuity and custodianship, echoing Genesis 2:15’s call to sustained care of creation. “Watchman,” however, conveys vigilance and readiness against danger, aligning with Isaiah 62:6’s image of prophetic guardianship (Waltke & O’Connor, 1990). The term “guardian” tends to suggest moral and legal accountability, while “protector” underscores active defence and intervention (Alter, 2007). Meanwhile, renderings such as “caretaker” or “preserver” underscore sustainability and ecological responsibility (Bauckham, 2010). Each nuance subtly shapes the way stewardship and responsibility are understood in theology.

Consequently, translation decisions affect how communities interpret humanity’s ecological vocation. Renderings that stress stewardship nurture an ethic of care and sustainable practice, whereas those that emphasize vigilance inspire a defensive posture against threats like pollution or land degradation (Brueggemann, 1998; Conradie, 2006). Some translations, by drawing attention to preservation and ongoing sustenance, connect biblical guardianship with modern ecological priorities such as biodiversity protection and sustainability (Bauckham, 2010).

In the Nigerian setting, where ecological crises such as deforestation, soil erosion, and desertification threaten livelihoods, these translational nuances are far from academic. They shape how Scripture is invoked in ecological ethics and faith-based advocacy. A deeper appreciation of the semantic and theological depth of שׂוֹמֵר can thus equip Nigerian Christians, theologians, and activists with a biblically grounded, context-sensitive framework for creation care (Ako, 2009).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ECOLOGICAL STEWARDSHIP IN NIGERIA

The Hebrew notion of שומר(shomér)—commonly translated as “keeper,” “guardian,” or “watchman”—speaks powerfully to Nigeria’s contemporary ecological situation. The country currently grapples with widespread environmental problems such as deforestation, soil depletion, desert encroachment, and loss of biodiversity (Ako, 2009; Kadafa, 2012). Interpreting שומר as a mandate for active stewardship provides a biblical rationale for Nigerians, particularly Christian communities, to embrace responsible ecological practices. This model of guardianship emphasizes not only protective vigilance but also intentional care, renewal, and restoration of the natural order (Bauckham, 2010).

From a theological perspective, שומר reflects the covenantal trust God places in humanity to manage creation faithfully. This responsibility is defined by accountability, care, and reverence for the integrity of the created world (Kearney, 2007; Brueggemann, 1998). In Nigeria, where ecological breakdown undermines both livelihoods and social cohesion, this vision challenges destructive exploitation of resources and instead calls for sustainable patterns of use that honour creation while promoting human flourishing (Conradie, 2006).

As a guiding framework, שומר offers practical insights for addressing Nigeria’s environmental crises. The country’s rapid deforestation—driven by commercial logging, farming expansion, and urbanization—ranks among the most severe globally (Kadafa, 2012). The ethic of stewardship embedded in שומר calls for deliberate conservation policies, community-led reforestation initiatives, and ecologically sensitive land-use systems that can restore balance to degraded ecosystems.

The northern regions of Nigeria, where desertification and land degradation jeopardize food security and spark conflicts over shrinking resources, illustrate another critical application (Ikelegbe, 2005). Rooting responses in the שומר principle encourages soil restoration projects, sustainable farming methods, and fairer land tenure practices—efforts that embody eco-justice and promote resilience (Ako, 2009).

Equally pressing is the issue of biodiversity loss, linked to habitat destruction and pollution (Orogun, 2010). The guardianship dimension of שומר underscores the responsibility to safeguard ecosystems, conserve endangered species, and cultivate public awareness of creation’s intrinsic worth. When integrated into national policy,

theological education, and grassroots advocacy, this biblical vision can inspire a spirituality of ecological care. Such spirituality motivates long-term commitments to environmental renewal and sustainable development (Bauckham, 2010; Conradie, 2006).

A closer analysis of שׁוֹמֵר and its translations reveals its layered meaning as “keeper,” “guardian,” “watchman,” or “caretaker.” Each rendering captures different facets of stewardship, from protective oversight to nurturing responsibility. The choice of translation—whether literal, dynamic, or theologically interpretive—inevitably shapes how readers perceive ecological obligation. Subtle shifts in wording highlight either defensive vigilance or active, sustaining care, both of which are necessary for a full theological vision of creation stewardship.

Key theological insights drawn from the term include divine order, accountability, covenant responsibility, and humanity’s relational bond with the natural world. שׁוֹמֵר articulates a divinely conferred duty to protect creation as a sacred trust, mirroring God’s sustaining role. This responsibility is not merely utilitarian but deeply ethical, intertwining ecological care with justice and covenant faithfulness. The balance implied by שׁוֹמֵר—protection alongside nurture, vigilance alongside preservation—mirrors the equilibrium required for healthy ecosystems.

In Nigeria, where environmental decline takes the form of deforestation, desertification, pollution, and species loss, שׁוֹמֵר provides a theological foundation for eco-ethical reflection and action. Its broad stewardship vision resonates with both indigenous values and Christian ecological sensibilities, presenting a scriptural mandate for holistic engagement that unites spiritual, social, and ecological concerns. This framework empowers churches, theologians, and policymakers to frame environmental responsibility as an extension of covenantal faithfulness and social justice. By fully embracing the rich meaning of שׁוֹמֵר, Nigerian eco-theology can respond with theological depth and ethical urgency to the ecological crises of our time.

For this reason, translators are called to strategies that preserve the full semantic range of שׁוֹמֵר, reflecting its diverse shades of meaning as both protective guardianship and nurturing care. Similarly, theologians must engage closely with the biblical languages and with present ecological realities to craft eco-theological frameworks that speak credibly to contemporary crises. Within churches, environmental advocates can draw on such theological insights to mobilize initiatives that are both culturally grounded and spiritually compelling.

CONCLUSION

The Hebrew term שומר (*shomer*) profoundly shapes theological and ecological understanding. Nuanced translation reveals stewardship as vigilant, responsible, and sustainable care for creation, while reductionist renderings obscure this vision. Further comparative and interdisciplinary research—especially within Nigerian contexts—can deepen insight into biblical guardianship and strengthen covenantal commitment to faithful earth-keeping

REFERENCES

- Ako, R. (2009). "Nigeria's Land Use Act: An Anti-Thesis to Environmental Justice." *Journal of African Law* 53(2): 289–304.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021855309990054>
- Alter, R. (2011). *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bauckham, R. (2010). *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Brown, F., Driver, S. R. and Briggs, C.A. (2005). *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Conradie, E.M. (2006). *Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for Further Research*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.
- Eze, C.C., and Eze, C.N. (2012). "Sustainable Land Management in Nigeria: Policy Issues and Challenges." *Journal of Environmental Management and Safety* 3, no. 1, 17–29.
- Gray, J. (1970). *I & II Kings: A Commentary*. 2nd ed. London: SCM Press.
- Ikelegbe, A.O. (2005). "The Economy of Conflict in the Oil-Rich Niger Delta Region of Nigeria." *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 14, no. 2, 208–234.
- Kadafa, A.A. (2012). "Environmental Impacts of Deforestation in the Niger Delta." *African Research Review* 6, no. 3, 1–15.
- Kearney, P.D. (2015). *The Biblical Hebrew Verbal System: A Grammatical and Exegetical Study*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- McKeown, J. (2008). *Genesis*. Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Moltmann, J. (1985). *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*. London: SCM Press.

- Orogun, P.S. (2010). "Environmental Degradation, Livelihood and Conflicts: A Focus on the Niger Delta." *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 10, no. 2, 31–56.
- Pinker, S. (2014). *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. New York: Viking.
- Smith, M.S. (2010). *The Priestly Vision of Genesis I*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Sweeney, M.A. (2012). *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Tigay, J.H. (1996). *Deuteronomy*. The JPS Torah Commentary. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.
- Waltke, B.K., and O'Connor, M. (1990). *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Westermann, C. (1984). *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House.
- White, L. Jr. (1967). "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155, no. 3767, 1203–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>
- Wright, C.J.H. (2004). *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.
- Zakovitch, Y. (2012). *Inner-Biblical Interpretation*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Zerbe, G. (2018). *Doing Biblical Ethics in the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Zuck, R.B. (1991). *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook.