

An Assessment of the Dominion Mandate of Humans: Ecological Implications of Genesis 1:26-28

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the meaning of the human mandate of dominion in Genesis 1:26-28. The exegetical reading of this text demonstrates that in contrast to interpretation that understands this mandate as a justification for exploiting the earth, God's command for humans to rule over the earth and subdue it refers to humans' responsibility for caring for the environment wisely and compassionately to create order, peace, and harmony on earth. Such a reading encourages Christians to actively take part in the current attempts to find solutions to various ecological crises. It is only by being actively involved in the healing of the world that Christians can demonstrate the relevance of the Bible in this modern world.

Key words : Ecological crisis, Rule over, Subdue, Creation, Dominion, Ecological analysis

Introduction

The environment is currently in a state of severe damage. Climate change, pollution of the air, water, and land, drought, the extinction of species, the loss of biodiversity, and the depletion of the natural resources are ecological issues that draw the attention of the world community (Kureethadam, 2014). All these problems are related to humans' excessive consumption of natural resources such as trees, gas, oil, metal ores, water, and fertile soil (Rhodes, 2020). This relentless increase in resource use exacerbates climate damage and increases air pollution which results in the depletion of freshwater sources as well as materials that are essential for our health and quality of life. Freshwater reserves, fish stocks, and forests are shrinking, many species are threatened with extinction and fertile land is then destroyed. Furthermore, indiscriminate disposal of plastic waste that is difficult to decompose by the soil threatens wildlife and spreads toxins given that al-

most all plastics are made from chemicals derived from the production of heating fuels such as gas, oil, and even coal (Friends of the Earth, 2019). All the ecological issues mentioned above are signs of a planetary crisis that will bring suffering to generations to come especially those who are already poor and vulnerable. They will struggle to meet their basic needs such as food security, health, and shelter (Kureethadam, 2014).

Humans' activities that destroy the earth indicate that they never see themselves as being part of nature; instead, they perceive themselves as superior to it and thus can easily control, conquer and exploit it to fulfill their greed. Scholars have concluded that the separation of humans from nature was caused by several factors such as the scientific revolution that led to industrialization and modernization which began in the 16th and 17th centuries. In his analysis, Capra argues that the scientific views of people like Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Bacon, and Descartes have replaced the idea of an organic,

living, and spiritual universe with the idea of the world as a machine (Capra, 1982). Various technologies were created by humans as tools to overcome human problems in this modern world. But along with that, humans lose touch with the universe. Humans no longer see the sea, mountains, rivers, waterfalls, and all creatures that live in this nature as part of themselves but as objects that are used to fulfill their needs and desires (Harding, 2006).

In addition to the influence of science, religion, especially Christianity, has also been criticized, especially by Lynn White, as having influenced the act of separating humans from the universe due to the anthropocentric approach of religion (White, 1967). According to White, the fact that Adam was created at the end of the creative process (Gen 1:26) led to the idea that the entire world was created for the benefit and power of humanity. Human beings were also created in the image of God which makes them very different from the rest of creation and thus legitimizes their rule on earth. Here, White argues that the dominion mandate of humans denotes a clear hierarchical level at which humans are assigned to be masters of the world (White, 1967). White then goes on to argue that Christianity has established a dualism between humans and nature and emphasized that it is because of God's will that humans exploit nature for their purposes. Furthermore, God is not seen as being part of nature but as being outside of it (White, 1967). This view of Christianity was then brought by missionaries to various parts of the world where the natives still adhere to animism which emphasizes a harmonious relationship between themselves and nature. The encounter of the natives with the missionaries made them finally begin to abandon the values that came from the existing local wisdom. This resulted in the disruption of their relationship with nature (White, 1967).

White's analysis, which correctly indicates several ecological phenomena, cannot be ignored. Here, White is right when he emphasizes humans' indifference to nature that underlies Western civilization. However, we need to reconsider the argument that "the Bible grants to humanity a 'dominion' over nature which has encouraged us to exploit nature for our own ends...[and] that the Bible privileges humanity...over the remainder of the creation" (Stead, 2010). Is this the only way to understand the dominion mandate of humans or is there any alternative meaning to it? Hence, this paper aims to reread the Bible to find out whether the Bible's texts

such as Genesis 1:26-28 are related to God's permission for human beings to exploit the earth. Thus, in our attempt to reread Genesis 1:26-28, we seek to reexamine the creation narrative to "raise Biblically friendly ecological awareness" (Manus and Obioma, 2016) in our today's world.

This paper is structured as follows: first is an ecological reading of Genesis 1:26-28. This reading will focus on an exegetical attempt to examine the words "to rule over" and "subdue" the creation to demonstrate human beings' responsibility to care for and protect the creation. Secondly, this study explores how the assessment of Gen 1:26-28 helps us to deal with the ecological crisis we face today.

An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1:26-28

The book of Genesis tells of two creation accounts, namely those found in Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Genesis 2:4b-3:24. In the first narrative, we encounter a transcendent and omnipotent God, a picture of human beings created in the image of God and also of the formation of the cosmos, a world that is ordered and judged by the Creator. In the opening of the six verses that describe the process of the formation of the earth and all that is in it, God looked and saw that everything God created was good and at the end of creation, God gave the final evaluation – it was all really good (Pardee, 2013). In Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over ... [all the animals]." This goal is complemented by a commandment in verse 28 to "fill the earth and subdue it." The critical question we are asking is - what does it mean to "rule over" the animals and what does it mean to "subdue the earth"?

The word "rule over" used in Genesis 1:26 comes from the Hebrew verb *radah*. This word can be translated as "to have power over," "to have dominion" and "take responsibility for" (Habel, 2000). However, when connected with its use in other verses, this word refers to the power that the powerful exerts harshly on the weak (Eze 34:4; Jer 34:11). In Psalm 110:2 for example, the sending of the king from Zion is associated with the defeat (*radah*) of his enemies. The same is also found in Psalm 72:9 where the king's power (*radah*) makes his enemies lick the dust. Thus, the word *radah* refers to the destructive effect experienced by those who are affected by such power. That is why in Lamentations 1:13, God sends fire from heaven to scorch the city, punish it and destroy it as if it were an enemy (Kavusa, 2021).

Thus, the word *radah* refers to an act of violence against the object being controlled. Here, the use of existing power is against the will of the people being ruled. When this word is applied to the context of creation found in Genesis 1, it is possible to interpret that humans were offered extraordinary power over the earth and the animals (Kavusa, 2021).

But a different understanding of the word *radah* comes from experts such as Stead who say that this word does not necessarily carry the meaning of destructive power. In his argument, Stead says that the word *radah* means destruction when it is followed by the Hebrew word *perek* which means violence (cf. Lev 25:43, 46, 53; Eze 34:4). And this formulation does not appear in Genesis 1 where the use of this word indicates the responsibility given to human beings to exercise power with benevolence and not by force (Stead, 2010). Furthermore, Stead says that the use of the word *radah* occurs only 22 times in the Hebrew Bible and apart from Genesis 1, it is never used to refer to dominion over the rest of creation. However, there is another word in Hebrew that has the same meaning as the use of *radah* in Genesis 1, namely the word *mashal* word in Psalm 8:6-8 (Stead, 2010). The parallel meaning of these two words can be seen below:

<p>Genesis 1:26 Let them rule over (<i>radah</i>) the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.</p>	<p>Psalm 8:6-8 You made him ruler over (<i>mashal</i>) ... all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea...</p>
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Here, the author of Psalm 8 has read Genesis 1 and understood the similarity of the Hebrew words *mashal* and *radah*. When the word *mashal* (power) is examined further concerning the use of nouns (especially *memshalah* which means “power”), Stead (2019) proposes three meanings as follows:

[1] God is the ‘ruler’ over all that he has made ‘...everything in heaven and earth is yours.... you are the ruler (*mashal*) of all things.’ (1 Chron 29:11-12); [2] He exercises that dominion by being loving to all he has made ‘...your dominion (*memshalah*) endures through all generations. The LORD is faithful to all His promises and loving toward all he has made... The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living

thing’ (Ps 145:13, 15-16); [3] God grants a ‘dominion’ over the creation to humanity. ‘You made him ruler over (*mashal*) over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet’ (Ps 8:6-8).

Stead’s view above indicates that the type of power that God gives to humans refers to the pattern of God’s power – namely a power that protects and maintains and not exploits and destroys. Thus, when God mandated humans to have dominion over the rest of creation, God did not give them the absolute right to exploit creation for their benefit. Instead, God delegated human beings a responsibility to protect creation and care for it (Stead, 2010).

The same can be seen in the root word “subdue” (Gen 1:28) which comes from the Hebrew verb *kabash*. Norman Habel in his study said that this word is used to describe harsh control, forceful subjugation, and even rape (Habel, 2000). This kind of meaning can be found when this verb is used with humans as objects where the object is taken by force or to make a subject (e.g., 2 Sam 8:11; Esth 7:8; Jer 34:11). Meanwhile, scholars such as Bauckham (2010) say that when this word is used with “land” as the object, it means more of “to occupy” or “take possession” (Num 32:22,29; Josh 18:1; 1 Chr 22: 18). However, I argue that even in the context where the land becomes the object, we can still sense the act of violence in it considering that in the process of occupation or control of the land itself, there is an act of defeating other nations who live the land. This explanation leads to the question – can the meaning of *kabash* as above be used to understand Genesis 1:28? Bauckham states that the command to subdue the earth that follows the previous command to fill the earth certainly does not carry violent connotations towards the earth and other creatures given that they were recently created and declared “good.” Therefore, the word “to subdue” here must be understood as a command to cultivate the land considering that agriculture is needed by human beings to fill the earth (Bauckham, 2010). Adam, as a human created by God, has to work the ground to make it productive by tending to and caring for it. Stead (2010) goes on to argue that:

It is important that we recognize that the Garden of Eden – even in its pristine state-required humanity to work it. God’s intention is *not* that humanity should have no impact on the created order, nor that the goal is to return things to their ‘natural state.’ Even prior to the disruption described in Genesis 3, humanity’s actions were required to keep the

garden from being unruly and unproductive. Gen 2:5 tells us that God did not send water to cause the plants to grow until there was a man to work the ground. These verses suggest that there is to be interdependence between humanity and the 'ground' – humanity (*adam*) is made from the ground (*adamah*) and depends on the ground for the food to sustain him. But the ground also depends on the man to work and tend it.

From the examination of the words *radah* and *kabash*, it is clear that the command to rule over animals and subdue the earth was given by God to human beings so that they can interact with other creatures without hostility, violence, or abuse. Both human beings and animals will share the plants that exist on earth (vv. 29-30). Here, although human beings are created in the likeness of God, they are different from God because they live in the world with the rest of the creation. Both humans and animals depend on the soil as a source of life. In addition, the depiction of humans as rulers over the earth and other creatures is limited by several rules to prevent humans from being arrogant and violent toward the creation (Kavusa, 2021).

Genesis 1:26-28 and the Care of the Earth

The analysis of God's commandment for humans to "rule over" and "subdue" yields a positive meaning. As God's representatives in the world and also God's co-creators, humans are given the task of caring for the environment wisely and compassionately to create order, peace, and harmony on earth (Hill, 1998). Here, every human action that exploits nature must be understood as an act against God's mandate. Thus, it is fair to say that text of Genesis 1:26-28 itself does not justify human exploitation of nature. The problem lies in the interpretation of the text, which then encourages European explorers, businessmen, and investors to engage in various economic activities, especially in the global search for energy sources which results in latifundalism or the act of seizing more and more land, ecological destruction, environmental pollution, land degradation, deforestation, desertification, and impoverishment mainly through various mining activities (Ahiamadu, 2010). In the context of countries such as Indonesia, the arrival of Western invaders who colonized various regions in Indonesia has led to the control and exploitation of land and various natural resources along with the local population and their cultures. Frederick Buell is right when states that,

"...its exploitation of its colonies underdeveloped them - that is, socially dismantled and economically depressed them - while Europe's development at home - its overdevelopment - was facilitated by the expropriation of work and wealth from the colonies. Moreover, the process of differential development did not end with colonialism; it continued into postcolonial and then global times" (Buell, 2003).

The ecological crisis faced by humanity today shows that humans have brought unavoidable destruction upon themselves. Therefore, our ecological reading of Genesis 1:26-28 encourages us to admit that we are responsible for the ecological crisis. Here, humans need to repent of their greed which makes them justify the act of exploiting and plundering planet earth. This repentance becomes the starting point for humans to start using natural resources of the world sufficiently to leave them for the next generation. Stead urges us "to choose between selfishness and love – choosing to love our neighbours as yet unborn, by bequeathing to them a functioning planet, rather than one scarred and corrupted by our selfishness" (Stead, 2010).

Next, we need to constantly talk about ecological issues we face today and look for solutions to heal this sick world. Here, we need to take strategic steps to ensure the conservation of natural resources to ensure the sustainable supply of natural resources that can sustain human life and other creatures on earth. This is where humans can fulfill their responsibilities as co-creators of God in this world.

Conclusion

Genesis 1:26 and 28 contain God's mandate to humans which gives them the purpose for their existence on this earth. This text also shows human's interdependence with the rest of creation. For this reason, humans are called to care for and protect God's creation. Humans' action to exploit the universe is an act of destruction of humanity and its civilization. This basic understanding encourages Christians to actively take part in the current attempts to find solutions to various ecological issues. It is only by being actively involved in the healing of the world that Christians can demonstrate the relevance of the Bible in this modern world.

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