

The Bible is Generally Eco-Friendly: An Eco-Theological Reference to Genesis 1:29

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing discourse among scholars regarding the ecological implications of the Bible centers on the tension between interpretations of Genesis 1:27-28, where God commands humanity to dominate and subdue the earth and its creatures, and the ecological ethos promoted by eco-centric theorists who advocate for viewing creation as inherently equal among all living beings. This paper seeks to critically analyze the rhetorical nuances of Genesis 1:27-28 in relation to Genesis 1:29, positing that the biblical text ultimately supports an eco-friendly paradigm. It asserts that while God declared creation to be "very good," the subsequent distortion of that creation is attributed to the fall. Prior to this event, animals were not intended as sustenance for humankind but were instead placed under humanity's stewardship. Although God provided seed-bearing plants and fruit-bearing trees as nourishment for humanity, this provision carries with it an implicit ethical obligation to refrain from exploitation. Consequently, the mandate bestowed upon humanity is construed as one of stewardship rather than outright dominion, reflecting a theocentric perspective that prioritizes divine glory over anthropocentric interests. Both the created order and humanity are intended to bear witness to and glorify God, functioning beyond mere utility for human benefit.

INTRODUCTION

The ethical relationship bestowed by God between humanity and the natural world constitutes the foundational objective of ecotheology. Within this framework, Christians engage with the Scriptures to articulate this complex relationship, as the Bible offers numerous teachings that serve to guide our ecological and ethical compass. These teachings encompass responsibilities for the protection of the environment, extending to the welfare of animals and the conservation of air, land, and water resources. Regrettably, the divine mandate for humanity to steward God's creation has frequently been misinterpreted, resulting in practices that lead to environmental degradation rather than fostering care. This phenomenon is primarily traced to the creation narratives presented in Genesis 1-2, which have been attributed to the Priestly writer. Both biblical scholars and eco-theologians contend that these texts have fostered harmful attitudes toward the environment. A central point of contention resides in Genesis 1:26-29, wherein humanity is granted "dominion" over animal life and instructed to "subdue" the earth, alongside the utilization of seed-bearing plants for sustenance. Critiques of this interpretation, notably articulated by Lynn White in his seminal essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," assert that such theological perspectives have contributed to ecological degradation. White posits that Christianity, due to its historical affiliations with science and modern technology, must bear a substantial "burden of guilt" concerning the contemporary ecological crisis. He argues that the biblical command of "dominion" has perpetuated exploitation rather than stewardship of the natural world.¹ Moreover, Jürgen Moltmann addresses the implications of this issue, emphasizing the need to interrogate how the Christian belief in creation, particularly as it has been articulated within

¹ L. White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", *Science* 155, (1967):1207. White claimed that Christianity has encouraged humans to think of themselves as nature's absolute masters, for whom everything that exists was destined. White, "The Historical Roots", 1207.

Western Christianity, has historically compounded ecological crises.² He underscores the necessity for a reinterpretation of these beliefs in order to forestall their complicity in environmental destruction, thereby advocating for a paradigm that fosters ecological harmony. Moltmann's inquiries bring forth critical considerations regarding humanity's obligations towards the environment, as well as the imperative for responsible interpretations of biblical texts that accurately convey the divine mandate for stewardship. Consequently, it is essential to reflect upon and diligently interpret Genesis 1:29, particularly with respect to its implications for contemporary ecological ethics and the ecclesiastical context. A careful exegetical approach to this passage is required to elucidate its ecological ramifications and to advocate for a biblically grounded, ecologically conscious praxis.

THE GENERAL CONTEXT OF GENESIS 1:29

This text provides an analysis of the primeval history as presented in Genesis 1-11, with particular focus on the theological implications of God's creation and the concomitant responsibilities assigned to humanity as His image-bearers, particularly in Genesis 1-2. It posits that the foundational premise for environmental stewardship is inherently rooted in the affirmation that God constitutes the creator of the cosmos, as articulated in Genesis 1:1.³ This understanding is pivotal for the correct interpretation of Genesis 1:29, which must be understood within the larger narrative of creation. In the narrative framework of Genesis 1-2, God emerges as the primary agent of creation, distinct from His creation, thereby facilitating the assertion that God's eternal attributes can be discerned through His creative works (Romans 1:20). The implication here is that every entity in the universe owes its

² Jürgen Moltmann, "God's Covenant and Our Responsibility." In Berry, *The Care of Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 10

³ Steve Bishop, "Green Theology and Deep Ecology: New Age or New Creation?" *Themelios* 16 (3) (1991): 8-14

existence to the creative acts of God, and nothing can exist outside of this divine act as delineated in Genesis 1-2. Subsequently, God has conferred upon humanity the role of stewards over creation, furnishing all necessary provisions for human existence and flourishing. Genesis 1:29 delineates the dietary provisions that God has ordained for humanity, underscoring the significance of fostering an eco-friendly existence that is reflective of divine glory. Moreover, to fully comprehend the essence of humanity's ecological responsibilities, one must also engage with Genesis 2:7-28, which further reinforces the notion of humanity as stewards of the Earth. The text underscores that all of creation is deemed "good" by God, and the creation narrative from Genesis 1:1-2:4a presents an originally "very good" creation. This state of goodness is sharply contrasted with the disarray introduced by the Fall in Genesis 3, which disrupted the initial harmony and innocence that characterized the climax of creation as illustrated in Genesis 2:25.⁴

THE EXPLORATION OF ECO-FRIENDLY THEOLOGY OF GENESIS 1:27-28 FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF GEN. 1:29

Genesis 1:27-28 serves as a foundational framework for interpreting verse 29; these verses must be analyzed within the broader context of creation and the divine responsibilities assigned to humanity. A failure to adhere to this contextual understanding risks misinterpreting verse 29 as granting humanity unrestricted license to exploit the universe for personal gain, devoid of any regard for stewardship. The text asserts that God created humankind in His image (v. 27). While various interpretations exist regarding the concept of the "image of God," it is imperative to relate this notion to the ancient Near Eastern context, where the term connotes a

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 181. See also Hulisani Ramantswana, "Humanity Not Pronounced Good: A Re-Reading of Genesis 1:26-31 in Dialogue with Genesis 2-3", *OTE* 26/2 (2013):432

representative role rather than being confined solely to attributes such as intellect, will, and emotion. In this context, the image can be understood as a representation of a king; thus, the image serves as a symbol of royal authority.⁵ Wilfong posits that being created in the image of God positions humanity in a quasi-divine role over creation. Just as earthly rulers erect statues of themselves to assert their sovereignty in areas where they are absent, humanity is appointed to enact and perpetuate God's sovereign rule across the entirety of creation.⁶

Consequently, existence in the image of God implies that humans are designed to represent God within His created order. In this capacity, God has granted humanity the authority to govern the Earth. Jotham M. Kangdim underscores this idea, asserting, "Through God's special relationship with him, He has endowed him and placed him over and above everything in His creation. At creation, man was given full charge of his creation" (1:27-28).⁷ Nonetheless, some scholars may interpret Kangdim's perspective as more anthropocentric than theocentric, particularly when he states that "the creation account, as reflected in Genesis 1 and 2, reveals that man was the main reason for God positing

⁵ C. Westermann, *The Genesis Accounts of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992), 35. The ancient near east contextual interpretation of *imago dei* affirms that humans (male and female) being made the image of God (in *imago dei*) imply the 'democratisation of the kingship metaphor'. The concept puts humans in a superior position to non-human beings. The concept clearly provides humans with the status of greater created beings as well as the 'right to exercise power over nature and conquer it as might do any ancient king' over his subjects or enemies. N.C. Habel, *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?* (Hindmarsh: ATF Press, 2009), 4.

⁶ M.M Wilfong, "Human Creation in Canonical Context: Genesis 1:26-31 and Beyond", in W.P. Brown, & S.D. McBride, (eds), *God Who Creates: Essays in Honour of W Sibley Towner*, 42-52 (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 45.

⁷ Jotham M. Kangdim, "A Recitation of the Preliminary Phase of Salvation History (Heilsgeschichte) in Primeval History", 102. In *Of Tradition And Traditions Essays In Honour Of Zamani B. Kafang* (Jos: Ade Printing Press, 2021), 87- 132.

creation in the first place. God recognized that for man's welfare and comfort, all elements of creation had to be in place prior to his arrival; moreover, even after the formal declaration of the completed creation, God continued to preside over it to ensure its ongoing survival and continuity."⁸ This interpretation leads to the critical understanding that creation serves purposes beyond mere human benefit; it fundamentally exists to manifest God's glory. While humanity is indeed integral to creation, the ultimate purpose of that creation is the glorification of God. This divine glory provides the foundational justification for the act of creation, wherein God appointed humanity as stewards. Thus, both humanity and creation should not be considered the final objectives of existence; rather, the ultimate goal is God, who is to be glorified. Any exploitation or mismanagement of creation constitutes an affront to this divine glory, which is inherently reflected within both creation and humanity. God alone deserves exaltation, with all created beings existing to glorify Him.

It is essential for humans to learn to respect non-human entities not merely for their utility but for their intrinsic value (Psalm 148:13). Humans should be viewed as integral members of the creation community rather than the central focus, with God alone as the ultimate aim of His creative work. As Bauckham notes, the Genesis 1 account possesses ecological significance, emphasizing the richness and diversity of living organisms while presenting creation—both animate and inanimate—as an interdependent whole. Humanity constitutes a vital element within this interdependent design. Although humans play a crucial role, the other parts of creation are equally significant.⁹ The dominion conferred upon humanity reflects the divine rule of God and must be

⁸ Kangdim, "Recitation of the Preliminary Phase", 104-105.

⁹ R.J. Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010), 15.19.

exercised within the framework of the created order, thus serving that order. However, several scholars have identified potential misinterpretations surrounding the two Hebrew terms used in Genesis, which could distort the biblical notion of environmental stewardship. Steve Bishop elucidates this concern, arguing that the concept of dominion is articulated in Genesis 1:28 through two central Hebrew terms: "radah" and "kabas." "Kabas" (to subdue) is a particularly forceful term, occasionally translated in a negative context as "rape" (Esther 7:8), while "radah" (to rule over) is similarly potent; Westermann interprets it as "to tread the winepress," and von Rad characterizes it as "to trample."¹⁰ Clarifying these problematic terms is critical, necessitating further exploration of their implications.

The perspective of "dominion" in the Old Testament, articulated through the Hebrew verb traditionally translated as "to have dominion," denotes the sovereign authority of a king over his subjects.¹¹ McDonagh posits that the term "dominate" should be understood as embodying divine kindness and love, thereby eschewing a framework of rule characterized by harsh authority.¹² This perspective advocates for a reexamination of biblical narratives that encourages viewing the earth as a subject—a kin—rather than a mere object or pawn subjected to domination.¹³ In this context, dominion is framed positively, with a focus on the assurance of well-being for all creatures and the realization of their inherent potential.¹⁴ The sequential creation of humanity

¹⁰ Bishop, "Green Theology and Deep Ecology", 10.

¹¹ D Jobling, "Dominion Over Creation," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, K Creim, ed (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1976), 247.

¹² S. McDonagh, *The Greening of the Church* (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis Books 1990), 119

¹³ Norman Habel, "The Origins and Challenges of an Eco-justice Hermeneutics", in Sandoval, T J & Madolfo, C (eds), *Relating to the Text. An Interdisciplinary and Form- Critical Insights on the Bible*, 290-306 (New York: T&T Clark 2003), 296.

¹⁴ W Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 32.

following the natural world suggests that "human dominion over creation" entails a responsibility of stewardship, acknowledging that nature is both finite and reliant on human care.¹⁵

This reciprocal dependency emphasizes that human dominion is not an exercise of isolated authority; rather, it is 'theonomous'—governed by divine regulation and profoundly informed by God's sovereignty.¹⁶ The primary function of human dominion is to emulate divine dominion, with the overarching objective of fulfilling God's purpose for creation. Conversely, the verb "to subdue,"¹⁷ as referenced in Genesis 2:5 and 2:15, should be interpreted within the context of stewardship, emphasizing the necessity to care for the land rather than exploit it.¹⁸ The intrinsic goodness of creation necessitates respect for and preservation of the divine order established by God.¹⁹ The editors of the New English Translation Bible (NET) contend that interpreting "to subdue" from an anthropocentric perspective engenders a notion of exploitation, framing the act as one of harnessing the earth's potential for human advantage. This interpretation risks distorting the intended meaning of Genesis, promoting a view that reduces creation to a mere instrument for satisfying

¹⁵ Rodriguez, *Stewardship Roots*, 22.

¹⁶ C. Beisner, *Where Garden meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (Grand Rapids: W B Eerdmans, 1997), 17.

¹⁷ "The occurrence of the feminine singular pronominal suffix on the verb *kbš* suggests that all of the earth is the object of subduing, not just the animal kingdom. Thus, we can conclude that the animal domestication suggested in *rdh* is only one part of the process of subduing. The twenty-five occurrences of *rdh* show that it concerns exercising authority that has been granted or acknowledged". John H. Walton, *Genesis: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 130. Furthermore on this the "conclusion, then, is that "subduing" is associated (grammatically, not semantically) with the prior verb, "filling," and has the earth as its focus." Walton, *Genesis*, 130. "Ruling" is directed toward the animals and implies domestication or some other level of use or control.

¹⁸ Angel M. Rodriguez, *Stewardship Roots* (STW: A Department of Church Ministries publication, 1994), 22.

¹⁹ Rodriguez, *Stewardship Roots*, 22.

human desires, thus providing a problematic justification for the ecological harms perpetuated by modernity that contradict the foundational biblical intent.

The biblical narrative presented in Genesis 1:26-28 attributes a significant status to human beings within the creation framework; however, it distinctly refrains from designating them as absolute rulers of the universe.²⁰ Rather, humans are depicted as custodians operating under the authority of the ultimate Creator. This interpretative viewpoint informs scholars such as Lohfink, who render the Hebrew verb "radah" as indicative of accompanying, shepherding, or guiding creation to "pasture," drawing parallels with the Akkadian term for governance or guidance.²¹ A noteworthy initiative that foregrounds this interpretative lens is 'The Green Bible,' which selectively presents passages in green ink to highlight the interrelatedness of all creation. This edition includes texts that illustrate God's intimate involvement with the natural world, emphasizing the intricate dependencies among land, water, air, flora, fauna, and humanity.²² Bauckham's assertion that the directive to "subdue the earth" embodies a call for responsible stewardship, rather than exploitation, accentuates the necessity for humans to embody God's loving kindness and fidelity in their interaction with the non-human components of creation.²³

In contrast, Habel critiques Genesis 1:26-28, characterizing it as a potentially ecologically harmful narrative that could be interpreted as granting humanity an unqualified right to dominate nature.²⁴ However, a nuanced reading of the text suggests that it does not advocate for cruelty but rather

²⁰ N. Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch: Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy* (Augsburg: Fortress, 1994), 17.

²¹ Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch*, 11.

²² *The Green Bible* (New York & London: HarperCollins, 2008), 1-16

²³ Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 19.

²⁴ Habel, "The Origins," 2.

encourages a model of leadership that reflects care and stewardship.²⁵ Although the Hebrew verbs frequently associated with subjugation may convey connotations of violence,²⁶ scholars such as De Pury propose that they be understood as expressions of "reigning" within a context of stewardship.²⁷ It is imperative to contextualize Genesis 1:26-28 within the broader narrative of Genesis 2:15, which delineates humanity's role as one of "tilling and keeping the garden."²⁸ This framing promotes a view of stewardship that eschews exploitation, as humanity—created in the image of God—is charged with maintaining harmony within creation.²⁹ This understanding aligns with the concept of ancient Israelite kingship, wherein kings were appointed not as absolute sovereigns but as viceroys of God, tasked with the responsibility of nurturing and safeguarding their subjects in a manner consistent with divine stewardship.³⁰

AN EXPOSITION OF GENESIS 1:29 THROUGH THE LENS OF ECO-FRIENDLINESS

Genesis 1:29 presents a perspective that diverges significantly from the ancient Near Eastern worldview, which posited that deities created humans primarily to serve their needs by providing sustenance.³¹ In stark contrast, the biblical

²⁵ McDonagh, *The Greening of the Church*, 119.

²⁶ F. Brown, et al., *Hebrew and English Lexicon on the Old Testament* (London: Oxford University Press 1968), 921-922

²⁷ A. De Pury, "Genesis 1 in its Historical Context and Today's Ecological Concerns", in Vischer, L (ed), *Listening to Creation Groaning: An Ecumenical Reflection on Creation Theology*, 61-74 (Geneva: Centre International Reformé John Knox, 2004), 69.

²⁸ D. G. Horrell, "Biblical Vegetarianism: A Critical and Constructive Assessment", in

Grumett, D & Muers, R (eds), *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology*, 44-59 (London: T&T Clark, 2010),34

²⁹ Wilfong, "Human Creation in Canonical Context", 46-7.

³⁰ Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 99.

³¹ John H. Walton (G.eds), *Genesis: Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan), 72.

narrative asserts that God created humanity to whom He subsequently provided nourishment. The act of God planting the Garden of Eden symbolizes His profound care and provision for His creation, accompanied by established guidelines for appropriate interaction with the trees and resources within that environment.

This biblical framework introduces both descriptive and prescriptive statutes regarding dietary practices, as God delineates permissible consumption for humanity. This notion embodies a shared responsibility between the divine and human agents for the preservation of life. God equipped Adam and Eve with all necessary provisions for their sustenance while articulating a specific diet in Genesis 1:29.³² Certain interpretations, notably from a vegetarian standpoint, assert that the early chapters of Genesis do not contain a divine mandate for the consumption of animals by humans. Rather, it is posited that God initially intended for plants and fruits to be the exclusive source of nourishment. This interpretation hinges on the belief that death, particularly among animals, was an anomaly that emerged only after the entry of sin into the world, suggesting that the original divine design did not encompass the consumption of animal life.

David L. Clough propounds that while Genesis 1 confers dominion over other creatures to humanity, it concurrently specifies plants as the designated food source for both humans and animals, implying that such dominion should not entail the taking of life.³³ Additionally, Genesis 2 reinforces this notion of harmonious coexistence between humans and non-human creatures, furthering the argument for a form of dominion that eschews killing. The discourse surrounding Genesis 1:29 incites considerable scholarly debate, particularly in light of Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato Si*.

³² Rodriguez, *Stewardship Roots*, 19

³³ David L. Clough, "Consuming Animal Creatures: The Christian Ethics of Eating Animals" *Studies in Christian Ethics* (2016):9.

This document articulates a vision of interconnectedness among all of God’s creation and advocates for a perspective wherein all creatures are recognized as part of a divine kinship deserving of compassion and care.³⁴ Nonetheless, the vegetarian interpretation faces challenges due to the absence of explicit prohibitions against the consumption of animals within Genesis chapters 1 and 2. This discussion is further complicated when considering Genesis 9, which emerges in the aftermath of the flood narrative. Within this context, humanity receives renewed directives from God, echoing the original commandments bestowed upon Adam. In this instance, Noah and his sons are positioned as representatives of humanity, reaffirming God’s earlier commandments regarding stewardship and dominion. In summation, this examination of Genesis 1:29 and its pertinent texts invites a reevaluation of humanity’s role and responsibilities toward creation, advocating for a balance between stewardship of all living beings and adherence to biblical provisions.

Genesis 1-2	Genesis 9
1v26 Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the bird of the ear, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground”.	v.2 The fear and dread if you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; “they are given into your hands”.
Verse 28a. God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.	Verse1. Then God blessed Noah and his sons saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.
Verse 30. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for “food” (see verse 29).	V.3 Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

³⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City State: Vatican Press, 2015), 11, 77

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³⁶ Rodriguez, *Stewardship Roots*,19

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CONCLUSION

The Christian doctrine of eco-friendliness is fundamentally anchored in the biblical understanding of creation and humanity's role as stewards, made in the image of God. This theological perspective asserts that humanity exists both within and above the created order, providing a framework through which interpreters can navigate the potential pitfalls of biocentrism and anthropocentrism—both of which risk

³⁷ David L. Clough, "Consuming Animal Creatures: The Christian Ethics of Eating Animals" *Studies in Christian Ethics* (2016):9.

³⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City State: Vatican Press, 2015), 11, 77

leading to the exploitation and degradation of the natural world. To fully engage with the biblical account of creation and the dietary directives given to humanity in Genesis 1:29, it is imperative to adopt a theocentric lens. As articulated by Bishop, “Subduing and ruling the creation, then, are to be done as God’s representatives: he is our role model.... One thing is immediately obvious: creation is not merely for humanity. The world exists for the glory of God: creation is not anthropocentric; it is theocentric. All things exist for and have their meaning in God.” This assertion underscores the necessity of perceiving creation not solely as a resource for human use but as a manifestation of divine glory and purpose. It is essential to recognize that following the narrative of the Fall, the terminology associated with dominion underwent a profound transformation, with the concept of stewardship giving way to domination, and the act of subduing evolving into exploitation. This shift marks a departure from the original divine intent for creation, wherein humanity was tasked with the care and cultivation of the natural world rather than its destruction. The biblical narrative strongly supports an eco-friendly ethos from its inception, a perspective that is critically undermined in Genesis 3, where the disruption of creation is depicted. Additionally, the work of redemption through Christ is intrinsically linked to the restoration of creation, echoing the themes of renewal established in the post-Flood narrative of Noah. Within this framework, creation is framed as an aspect of God's good work, and eschatologically, the biblical vision proclaims not the annihilation of the world, but its renewal. The inherent goodness of creation, coupled with humanity's mandate to steward it responsibly, emphasizes a theological commitment to ecological stewardship that extends into the anticipated fulfillment of God's redemptive plan.

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