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Title:
Ecological perspective in Genesis 1:26-30 as an approach to environmental stewardship

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ABSTRACT
Africa faces a mounting environmental crisis manifested in deforestation, pollution, erosion, and unregulated exploitation of natural resources. This paper investigates these ecological challenges through a theological lens, specifically examining Genesis 1:26–30 to articulate a biblically grounded ecological ethic. The study identifies the root of the problem as a dual disconnection: humanity's alienation from both God and creation, fuelled by anthropocentric misinterpretations of Scripture that justify environmental degradation. The paper examines how re-reading Genesis 1 from an ecological perspective can inform Christian responsibility toward environmental stewardship in Nigeria. The methodology employed is a contextual and theological analysis of the Genesis creation narrative, engaging biblical exegesis and African contextual realities to discern theological insights relevant to ecological conservation. The findings reveal that the Genesis text promotes a theology of responsibility rather than dominion, where humanity functions as a steward rather than a master of creation. The biblical mandate to "have dominion" is reframed as a call to care, preserve, and sustain the created order in partnership with God. This reinterpretation challenges exploitative attitudes and the intrinsic value of all creation. In light of these findings, the paper recommends a transformative theological education that integrates environmental ethics, active church involvement in ecological advocacy, and partnerships between religious institutions and environmental agencies. The Nigerian church can become a prophetic voice and practical agent in addressing the country's ecological crisis by reorienting theology to support environmental sustainability.
Keywords: Environmental Stewardship, Genesis 1:26–30, Ecological Theology, Creation Care, Africa, Anthropocentrism

A. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has ushered humanity into an era of extraordinary ecological challenges. From soaring global temperatures and widespread deforestation to polluted oceans and mass extinction of species, the scale of environmental degradation has reached alarming proportions. Once perceived as inexhaustible, the earth's ecosystems are now under critical threat, and the consequences are global, far-reaching, and in some cases, irreversible. Scientists, international policy-makers, and grassroots movements have all acknowledged these crises' urgency, yet meaningful and unified action remains staggeringly slow. This inertia signals a crisis of policy and science and a moral and spiritual failure. At the heart of today's environmental collapse is a growing recognition that the current trajectory of consumption and exploitation is unsustainable and that humanity must re-evaluate its role within the larger web of life. One of the critiques of the environmental crisis is that it stems from a disjointed worldview. This paradigm alienates humans from nature, treats the earth as a mere resource, and elevates economic growth over ecological integrity. The dominant narratives of modernity have promoted a mechanistic view of the world where nature is commodified and human mastery over it is glorified. Consequently, many societies have internalised an anthropocentric ethic that sees humans as the end of creation, with the non-human world reduced to utility and instrumentality.

Such ideologies have led to the exploitation of forests, the contamination of rivers, the poisoning of the atmosphere, and the disruption of delicate ecological balances.

In contrast to these prevailing narratives, recent decades have witnessed a growing interest in holistic approaches that emphasise interdependence, reciprocity, and ethical responsibility toward the natural world. Environmental ethics, ecotheology, and ecological economics are among the interdisciplinary efforts to integrate ecological sustainability with social justice and spiritual meaning.

These fields argue for a fundamental shift from domination to stewardship, ownership to kinship, and consumption to conservation. The environmental movement, once the domain of scientists and activists, has expanded to include philosophers, theologians, educators, and faith leaders who collectively seek to redefine humanity's place in creation. The growing ecological consciousness among faith-based groups is not merely a trend but a moral imperative.

As climate change intensifies and natural resources dwindle, an urgent need to cultivate a new ethic that reorients humanity toward sustainability, justice, and mutual flourishing. The call is not only to protect endangered species or conserve biodiversity, but to fundamentally reimagine the human story as one that is interwoven with the earth's narrative. This reimagination requires that humanity see themselves not as conquerors or consumers but as caretakers and companions of the planet.

The crisis of the environment, therefore, is not just ecological or political; it is spiritual. It calls into question the values underpinning modern civilization- individualism, consumerism, and technological supremacy- and a return to values that honour simplicity and reverence for life. It compels societies to move beyond short-term gains and toward long-term responsibility. This shift demands an ethical vision informed not only by empirical data but by moral values, one that embraces the ecological crisis and seeks holistic solutions.

The urgency of the environmental crisis demands manifold responses that engage the intellect and the conscience. Through analytical discourse and biblical exegesis, the research contributes to the growing field of eco-spirituality and environmental ethics, addressing a gap in scholarship that separates ecological concerns from moral and religious inquiry. It is a constructive critique of the anthropocentric paradigms that have dominated environmental discourse, advocating instead for a theocentric or ecocentric vision that affirms the sacredness of all life.

The study catalyses thought and transformation in daily practice. It is a call to awaken to the reality that how we treat the earth is a matter of values, and that caring for the planet is a scientific necessity and a spiritual mandate. Therefore, this research provides theoretical and practical pathways for institutions and individuals committed to the flourishing of life on earth. Through this integrated lens, environmental stewardship becomes not a burdensome obligation but a joyful vocation in reverence, responsibility, and hope.

B. ECOLOGICAL CRISIS IN AFRICA

Africa's ecological crisis has become a defining concern of the 21st century. This crisis manifests in multiple, interconnected ways, including deforestation, desertification, and biodiversity loss, pollution, and climate change impacts. As a continent rich in natural resources yet burdened by developmental challenges, Africa finds itself at a crossroads where environmental sustainability is in direct tension with economic survival and growth.

The ecological degradation witnessed today results from the historical, political, economic, and social trajectories that have African nations since colonial times. This necessitates a holistic and

contextualised response integrating indigenous knowledge systems, faith-based values, scientific research, and political will.

One of Africa's most visible aspects of ecological crisis is widespread environmental degradation from resource exploitation. From the expansive forests of the Congo Basin to the savannahs of West Africa, unsustainable logging, mining, and agricultural practices have stripped ecosystems of their vitality.

For instance, Afolayan and Ajibade (2020, p. 142) observe that over 55% of Nigeria's original forest cover has been lost due to unregulated human activities. Similarly, the Congo Basin continues to face severe deforestation due to legal and illegal timber extraction and expanding agriculture (Ndoye & Awono, 2010, p. 68). The environmental cost is high as these ecosystems are critical to biodiversity conservation, carbon sequestration, and the livelihoods of indigenous populations.

The continent is also bearing the disproportionate brunt of global climate change. While contributing minimally to global carbon emissions, African countries suffer the most from its consequences. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and recurrent droughts have become common across the continent.

In East Africa, prolonged droughts have disrupted agricultural cycles and livestock grazing, leading to food insecurity and economic destabilisation (Ochieng, 2019, p. 74). West and Central Africa have seen increased incidences of flooding, causing displacement and spreading diseases. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022) confirms Africa's heightened vulnerability due to its dependence on climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture and water resources.

According to Adamu and Salami (2017, p. 118), the Sahel region, where changing rainfall patterns have reduced cereal yields and pasture productivity, aggravates poverty and conflict.

Rapid urbanisation and poor waste management also contribute to the ecological crisis in African cities. Urban areas are expanding rapidly, without adequate planning or infrastructure. Informal settlements, lacking proper waste disposal systems, have become epicentres of pollution. Ofoezie et al. (2022, p. 2) show how solid waste clogs drainage systems, leading to flooding and contamination of water bodies.

Moreover, air pollution from the widespread use of biomass fuels such as charcoal and firewood causes health problems and contributes to environmental degradation. Nguema (2021, p. 96) notes that indoor air pollution from cooking with biomass is a leading cause of respiratory diseases among urban poor populations.

Biodiversity loss is another critical aspect of the ecological crisis. Africa is home to an extraordinary range of flora and fauna, many of which are endemic. However, habitat destruction, overexploitation, invasive species, and pollution have led to declines in biodiversity. Protected areas are increasingly threatened by human encroachment for agriculture, settlement, and development.

In East Africa, for example, populations of large mammals have declined dramatically due to habitat fragmentation and illegal poaching (Western et al., 2009, p. 202). The African Biodiversity Collaborative Group (2020, p. 9) warns that this biodiversity loss undermines ecosystem resilience and the ability of nature to provide essential services such as pollination, water purification, and climate regulation.

Africa's ecological crisis is not without socio-economic implications. Environmental degradation directly affects agriculture, the backbone of most African economies and the primary source of livelihood

for rural populations. Farmers face reduced yields and increased vulnerability as soil fertility declines and water becomes scarce. This leads to food insecurity, malnutrition, and rural poverty.

Moreover, environmental stress triggers migration, placing pressure on urban centres struggling to cope with population growth and inadequate infrastructure. Ibeanu (2008, p. 35) discusses how environmental degradation in regions like the Lake Chad Basin has led to displacement and conflict over diminishing resources. This rural-to-urban migration fuels cycles of poverty and environmental degradation in urban peripheries.

While many African nations have developed environmental policies and ratified international treaties, implementation remains weak. Agbakoba and Nwauche (2006, p. 173) argue that corruption, lack of political will, and poor institutional coordination hinder effective enforcement. These policies mirror Western models that do not consider Africa's socio-cultural and ecological realities. Muneza (2022, p. 43) points out that environmental laws in many African countries fail to incorporate traditional ecological knowledge and exclude locals from decision-making processes.

This alienation reduces the effectiveness of conservation efforts and limits buy-in. Before the advent of colonialism and industrialisation, African societies practised environmentally sustainable livelihoods through rotational farming, sacred groves, communal land management, and taboos against overexploitation. Millar (2003, p. 52) notes that these systems promoted a respect for nature and maintained ecological balance. In many African cultures, land and nature are considered sacred, and humans are seen as stewards rather than exploiters of creation.

Abegunde (2018, p. 60) notes that African traditional religions embed environmental ethics in rituals and cosmology, encouraging sustainable interaction with the natural world.

Faith-based and moral values also play an essential role in African environmental stewardship. Religious institutions wield influence and mobilise for ecological justice. Churches, mosques, and traditional religious leaders raise awareness about environmental degradation and encourage behaviours that promote sustainability. Integrating spiritual and ethical values into environmental education and policy helps create a culture of care for creation.

According to Paul Muneza (2022, p. 47), faith-based ecological ethics create a holistic and context-sensitive response to the ecological crisis. Therefore, Africa's ecological crisis is a multifaceted challenge that demands a multidimensional response. It requires rethinking development paradigms, empowering, strengthening governance, and integrating traditional knowledge and ethical values into environmental policies.

The urgency of the crisis cannot be overstated. Without immediate and sustained action, the continent risks ecological collapse and social and economic destabilisation. African scholars and policy-makers must take the lead in crafting solutions for the continent's unique ecological, cultural, and historical contexts.

C. EXEGESIS OF GENESIS 1:26–30

The passage Genesis 1:26–30 is situated within the Priestly creation narrative (Gen. 1:1–2:3), widely recognised for its highly structured and formal literary style. Scholars such as Gordon Wenham (1987, p. 15) identify this section as part of a liturgical and poetic tradition that organises the cosmos' origin into a symmetrical six-day scheme, culminating with the Sabbath rest. This segment, specifically verses 26–30, marks the conclusion of the sixth day, which stands as the climactic act of creation.

Unlike earlier creative acts that speak in direct and commanding language ("Let there be light"), here the divine speech becomes more deliberative with the phrase "Let us make," suggesting a different mode of divine activity and intention (Walton, 2001, p. 129). The passage functions as a literary climax, the significance of humanity's creation as the apex of God's creative work.

The purposeful progression of the narrative from the formation of the environment (days 1–3) to the filling of creation (days 4–6) is an ordered cosmos designed for habitation and governance. This literary form asserts that humans occupy a unique and honoured place within creation's hierarchy.

Verse 27 exhibits characteristic Hebrew poetic parallelism, an artistic literary technique that conveys the message through repetition and balanced syntax. The verse reads: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This tripartite structure highlights the significance of being made in the divine image and the inclusivity of this identity by explicitly mentioning both male and female.

According to Claus Westermann (1984), such repetition stresses the sacred nature of human creation, using the verb בָּרָא "create" thrice to the intentionality and uniqueness of humankind's origin (pp. 157–159). The parallel construction mirrors forms throughout the Hebrew Bible, where balance and repetition function to understand and retain central truths.

By placing "male and female" at the end of the verse, the text deliberately affirms the equal dignity and shared image-bearing status of both genders, which has important implications for biblical anthropology and ethics (Clines, 1968, p. 67).

Structurally, the narrative of creation in Genesis 1 unfolds in two triads: the first three days involve creating the domains (light/darkness, sky/waters, land/vegetation), while the second three days focus on filling these domains with inhabitants (sun/moon/stars, birds/fish, animals/humans). Humans appear as the final creatures, assigned dominion over the rest of creation, a deliberate literary pattern (Sarna, 1989, p. 12). This placement is not accidental but deliberate, signifying that humans are the intended stewards of the created order.

The passage entrusts humanity with dominion (v. 28), an authority coupled with responsibility to "rule over" the fish, birds, and animals, indicating a custodial role. Moreover, the provision of "every plant yielding seed" and "every tree with seed in its fruit" as food for humans and animals (vv. 29–30) points to a harmonious relationship between creation's inhabitants, predicated on divine provision and stewardship.

Syntactical Analysis of Genesis 1:26-30

A syntactical analysis of this passage enables a closer examination of the grammatical and literary features that its meaning, particularly the divine-human relationship and humanity's role within creation. This passage features imperative forms, coordinate clauses, and divine speech acts that collectively frame the mandate of dominion and stewardship.

a. The Divine Declaration: "Let Us Make Humanity…" (v.26)

Verse 26 opens with a unique syntactical feature in the creation narrative: using the plural pronoun in the divine declaration, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness." This plurality in the divine speech marks a distinct moment of deliberation and communal intent within the Godhead.

The Hebrew pronouns נַעֲשֶׂה "let us make," and בְּצַלְמֵנוּ "our" have attracted varied scholarly interpretations. As noted by Heiser (2015), one prevalent view is that this plural form refers to a divine council or heavenly assembly with which God consults before creation. In ancient Near Eastern thought,

divine councils were common, where the chief deity deliberated with lesser spiritual beings before acting in the cosmos. This interpretation situates the biblical narrative within its cultural milieu that God's creative act is not arbitrary but occurs within a relational context of divine governance (Heiser, 2015, p. 65).

From a grammatical perspective, the plural represents the "plural of majesty," a way of expressing the transcendence and sovereignty of God (von Rad, 1972, p. 58). Christian interpreters see this phrase as an early indication of the triune nature of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in conversation (Kidner, 1967, p. 52).

Jewish scholars and historians of religion frequently connect this wording to the Ancient Near Eastern concept of a divine council, where God consults with a heavenly assembly before action, a motif also evident in Ugaritic texts and other contemporaneous cultures (Heiser, 2015, pp. 39–41).

Alternatively, some scholars interpret the plural pronouns as a majestic plural, a grammatical device used to express the grandeur or authority of a singular entity, rather than implying actual plurality within God's nature. Westermann (1984, p. 122) argues that the plural form conveys divine majesty and power rather than plurality of persons, the transcendent dignity of God as Creator. Though this interpretation is rather than strictly linguistic, the continuity of biblical revelation is understood within Christian doctrine.

Regardless of interpretative tradition, the phrase indicates the weightiness and deliberateness of creating humankind and its distinguished status and purpose.

Beyond the plural pronouns, the verb form נַעֲשֶׂה, meaning "let us make," appears in the cohortative mood, which conveys intention, determination, and deliberation. Wenham (1987, p. 38) explains that the cohortative verb introduces a deliberate decision by God to create humanity with a distinct purpose, that human creation is not accidental or spontaneous but a resolute act of divine will.

The cohortative mood captures the unfolding plan of creation, signalling that humans are made with intentionality to fulfil a particular role. The phrase "in our image, after our likeness" further amplifies this intentionality through syntactical parallelism. The Hebrew words "image" and "likeness" appear as a synonymous parallelism, the weight of humanity's unique status.

Kidner (1967, p. 48) asserts that "image" the representative nature of humans as God's vice-regents on earth, while "likeness" refers to the moral and spiritual resemblance to God, marking humans as distinct from other creatures. Completing the divine declaration is the purpose clause that outlines humanity's vocation: to exercise dominion over the fish, birds, livestock, and all the earth. This clause grammatically links the creation of humans with their assigned function within the created order.

The verb "have dominion" indicates stewardship and governance rather than exploitative control. Scholars like Clines (1968, p. 207) note that this dominion has a fiduciary responsibility to care for and manage creation in a way that honours its divine origin. These syntactical features, therefore, are not merely linguistic but foundational for understanding humanity's role in creation from an ecological perspective.

b. Imago Dei: Identity and Responsibility (v.26–27)

Verses 26–27 unfold within the creation of Genesis 1, marking the culmination of the divine creative act. The verb וַיִּבְרָא, "and He created," is noteworthy for its perfect tense form coupled with the waw-consecutive, indicating a sequential, decisive, and deliberate creative action. This conveys that creating humanity is not incidental but purposeful, which made humans hold a distinct place in the

created order (Sarna, 1989, p. 9). The verb's subject is אֱלֹהִים, the majestic plural for God, further underlining the divine sovereignty at work.

The direct object אֶת־הָאָדָם, "the man" or "humankind," is prefixed by the accusative marker אֶת, which explicitly marks the entire entity as the object of creation. This specificity affirms the unique ontological status of humans as fully constituted beings fashioned by divine intention.

The phrase בְּצַלְמוֹ, "in His image," functions as a prepositional phrase describing the manner of creation, indicating that the human God's image or representation constitutes humanity's very being. The suffix pronoun -וֹ refers to God, connecting the divine origin directly with human identity.

The noun "image," is a term embedded in Ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, where kings were seen as the physical and political representatives of deities on earth (Kaiser, 1990, p. 134). This contextual background understanding of the significance of the phrase: human beings are created as God's representatives or vice-regents in creation.

The syntax places "image" immediately after "God," firmly linking the divine and human identities in a way that transcends mere physical resemblance, implying functional authority and responsibility (Beale, 2011, p. 63). The parallel phrase בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים, "in the image of God," follows immediately, employing synonymous parallelism, a common feature in Hebrew poetry and prose that means through repetition and variation (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990, p. 58). This literary device, the indelible nature of the divine image in humanity, prevents any dilution or misinterpretation of the concept.

Further syntactic analysis shows a shift from singular to plural pronouns and verbs with ecological implications. The singular אֹתוֹ, "him" in זָכָר אֹתוֹ, "He created him" is immediately succeeded by the plural אֹתָם, "them" in זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם, "male and female He created them." This transition is deliberate, and the divine image is not restricted to a singular male figure but is embodied collectively in both males and females. The conjunction וּ "and" linking זָכָר, "male" and נְקֵבָה, "female" syntactically unites both genders, asserting the inclusive nature of divine image-bearing and conferring equal ontological dignity on all humans regardless of gender (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 18).

The human vocation to bear God's image thus extends to all humanity collectively, forming a communal responsibility toward the created order. The plurality of a relational ontology is that human identity is not merely individualistic but inherently social and interconnected. This communal aspect of the *imago Dei* is found in ecological stewardship, where relationality and interdependence are foundational principles (Berry, 1999, p. 52).

The importance of these syntactic features further relates to human responsibility in creation. Being created *in His image* does not merely confer status; it entails the duty to exercise stewardship of divine care, justice, and creativity. The explicit verbal repetition of בָּרָא, "created" God's creative authority and by extension the delegated authority to humans to maintain and steward creation (Schmid, 2006, p. 109).

The syntactic construction mirrors the relational and functional dimension of humanity's role: as image-bearers, humans act as God's agents, ruling over and tending the earth in ways that mirror God's sustaining governance. The divine image is a marker of ontological dignity that transcends gender and social status, simultaneously serving as the foundation for ecological responsibility.

The linguistic features thus provide a basis for interpreting human beings as both reflectors of divine character and stewards of the natural world, a mandate with ethical and environmental implications.

c. Dominion and Subduing: Terms of Trust, Not Tyranny (v.26, 28)

Verses 26 and 28 contain two pivotal verbs related to humanity's role over creation: הִדָּךְ, "to have dominion") and שִׁבַּכְ, "to subdue." These verbs form the core of the divine mandate regarding human authority over other creatures and the earth itself.

A careful syntactical examination of these terms within their immediate context and the canonical usage reveals an understanding of these commands as calls for responsible stewardship rather than unbridled exploitation. In Genesis 1:26, the verb יִרְדּוּ, a form of הִדָּךְ, is used: וְיִרְדּוּ, translated as "and let them have dominion." The verb appears imperfect, indicating a future, ongoing action. This syntactical form points toward an active, continuous exercise of dominion by humanity over "the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, the livestock, all the earth, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Gen. 1:26).

The scope of this dominion (encompassing all living creatures and the earth) linguistically the comprehensive nature of human responsibility. Yet, הִדָּךְ in the Hebrew Bible frequently denotes not only rule but governance with a sense of justice and care (e.g., Psalm 72:8). As Waltke (2007, p. 204) explains, הִדָּךְ suggests "to rule with wisdom and care," marking it as an ethical stewardship rather than exploitative dominance.

Verse 28 expands the mandate by introducing שִׁבַּכְ, a verb meaning "to subdue, to bring into subjection." The verse states, וְכִבְּשֻׁהָ, "and subdue it." The verb appears in the imperative form, commanding action, yet syntactically balanced by the parallel verb יִרְדּוּ "and have dominion."

The root שִׁבַּכְ frequently appears in biblical contexts involving military conquest or land subjugation (e.g., Joshua 10:40). However, within the creation context, the imperative calls for subduing the earth to enable human flourishing without destruction. Wenham (1987) states that the verb here must be understood "within the creation order as establishing human responsibility to bring order and sustainability to the earth, not to exploit or devastate it" (p. 51).

Syntactically, the verbs הִדָּךְ and שִׁבַּכְ are coordinated by the conjunction וְ, indicating complementary actions: to "have dominion" and to "subdue." The pairing in parallel syntax of the meaning implies a balanced governance—dominion without subjugation is incomplete, and subduing without authority is ineffective. This parallelism suggests that humanity's role is authoritative and custodial, exercising power within the boundaries of care and maintenance.

d. The Blessing of Vocation (v.28)

Verse 28 is a critical juncture in the creation narrative, marking the transition from the act of creating humanity to assigning its vocational purpose within the created order. The verse is framed by a divine blessing, followed by a series of imperatives that define human responsibility. The opening verb וַיְבָרֶךְ, "and He blessed" is in the waw-consecutive imperfect form, which in Hebrew narrative indicates a consequential or sequential action following the creation of human beings in the preceding verses (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990, p. 254).

This blessing signifies divine approval and empowerment for the tasks ahead, making the ensuing commands normative and foundational. The syntactical construction places emphasis on God's speech by the clause וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים, "and God said to them" wherein the divine name אֱלֹהִים is repeated. This repetition is a syntactic marker of authority and solemnity in ancient Hebrew narrative (Alter, 1996, p. 19).

The commands are presented in a series of imperative verbs, connected primarily by the conjunction וְ "and" indicating a sequence of related but distinct directives that constitute the human mandate.

The first imperative, פְּרוּ, "be fruitful," is a Qal imperative addressing an active, ongoing process of fruitfulness. This verb, understood in a biological sense, can also be interpreted to include productivity in cultural, social, and spiritual realms (Walton, 2001, p. 105). The immediate parallel command, רְבוּ, "multiply," is likewise an imperative plural, the call to numerical increase and expansion. The syntactical pairing of these verbs in Hebrew poetry and prose frequently connotes blessing and prosperity (Sarna, 1989, p. 14).

Following these, the imperative מַלְאוּ, "fill," takes the verb root מָלְאָ (*male*) and applies it to the earth אֶת־הָאָרֶץ. The accusative marker אֶת identifies the definite direct object that the filling is not random but purposeful and directed toward the entirety of the earth's surface (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 42). Syntactically, this verb calls for spatial occupation and responsible inhabitation, a divine intention for humanity to extend its presence worldwide.

The subsequent verbs כִבְשֻׁהָ and וְרִדוּ, "subdue it" and "rule," respectively, further define the human vocation by describing an active exercise of authority over the earth. כִבְשֻׁהָ is a Piel imperative with the 3rd person feminine singular suffix referring back to the earth הָ, , indicating a causative action of bringing the earth into submission or harnessing its potential (Hamilton, 1990, p. 171).

The verb וְרִדוּ, an imperative plural, calls for governance or dominion, and when combined with the objects that follow, expands the scope of human authority to include animals and natural resources. The phrase :דְּגַ֣ת הַיָּ֗ם וּבְעֹ֤וף הַשָּׁמַ֙יִם֙ וּבְכָל־חַיָּ֔ה הָרֹמֶ֖שֶׂת עַל־הָאָֽרֶץ· lists the domains over which humans are instructed to exercise dominion: the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every living creature that moves on the land.

The syntactic parallelism and repetition of the preposition בְּ "over/in" structure a comprehensive scope that includes aquatic, aerial, and terrestrial life forms (Walton, 2011, p. 112). This parallelism not only defines the breadth of human stewardship but also poetically the totality of creation entrusted to humanity.

The imperative verbs are counterbalanced by an overarching understanding that creation belongs to God. This is syntactically implied rather than explicitly stated in the verse but is foundational to proper interpretation (Psalm 24:1). Thus, the commands to "fill," "subdue," and "rule" are understood within a covenantal that responsible stewardship rather than exploitative domination (Moberly, 2009, p. 65).

Scholars have noted that the Hebrew verbal system here conveys ongoing and future-oriented action (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990, p. 255). This suggests that the vocation of humanity is not limited to initial acts but entails continual responsibility.

e. Provision and Vegetarian Harmony (v.29–30)

The opening of verse 29 states, וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, "And God said"), resuming the divine speech pattern that commands and blesses the newly created order. The structure here is clear and deliberate, marking a divine provision following the vocational mandate of humanity in verse 28.

The direct object in verse 29, "seed-bearing plants" and "fruit trees bearing fruit with seed in it" show the provision of renewable, life-sustaining food sources (Sarna, 1989, p. 18). The phrase, "they shall eat" is in the Qal imperfect form, conveying ongoing habitual action and a sustained relationship between creatures and their food. This verb links the divine provision with human reliance on plant-based sustenance, suggesting an ideal diet in God's original intention.

The syntactical clarity that food comes "from every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth" stresses the universal scope of this provision, framing it as adequate for humanity.

Verse 30 extends this provision explicitly to the animal kingdom, stating that "to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth" God gives "all the green plants for food." This inclusive syntactical construction parallels verse 29 but shifts the focus from seed-bearing plants and fruit trees to all green vegetation, the provision for non-human life.

The repetition of the verb "to give" links these verses, God's role as the provider. These verses articulate an original ideal of ecological harmony and vegetarian provision, a non-violent food web that contrasts with post-fall realities of predation and death. This vision is an ontology of peace and mutual flourishing within creation, consistent with later prophetic imagery of the wolf dwelling with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6–9). Syntactically and semantically, the verbs and objects build a picture of sustenance that is abundant, continuous, and non-destructive (Hamilton, 1990, p. 179).

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The concept of human identity within the context of divine creation forms a foundational pillar for understanding ecological stewardship from a perspective.

The assertion that humanity is created in the image of God (Imago Dei) carries implications for how humans relate to themselves, other creatures, and the environment at large. This identity is both ontological and functional, entailing a unique status and a divinely conferred responsibility to exercise stewardship over creation. This stewardship is not a license for exploitation but a covenantal trust that demands ethical engagement grounded in the character and purpose of God.

Mugambi (2002, p. 154) notes that the plural divine pronoun in the creation narrative ("Let us make") points to a relational understanding of God that has implications for human identity. This plural form signifies the communal and dynamic nature of the Godhead, which becomes the model for human existence, social, relational, and participatory. This relational ontology challenges Western individualistic models by showing that identity and responsibility are realised in and through environmental interaction.

The communal dimension is crucial in framing stewardship as an ethical mandate that integrates social and ecological concerns. Bevans and Schroeder (2004, p. 120) argue that African contexts especially reveal the inseparability of human life and environment, suggesting that an environmental ethic must include the well-being of the ecosystem alike. This integrated view resists any dualistic separation of humans and nature for a stewardship that respects the integrity of creation.

Further, Kanyoro (2006, p. 98) critiques Western interpretations of dominion as a license for unrestrained control over nature and how these interpretations have historically contributed to environmental degradation and African socio-economic inequalities. She advocates for a recovery of African indigenous knowledge and values, which view humans as caretakers within a network of life that includes spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions. This stewardship is framed as a sacred trust, demanding respect, humility, and mutual care, rather than domination and exploitation.

As Mbiti (1990, p. 72) explains, the African traditional worldview is ecological and spiritual, with humans perceived as part of a larger cosmic order that includes ancestors, spirits, animals, and the land. This worldview has a sense of accountability whereby human actions have spiritual and communal consequences. The human role is thus that of a mediator who maintains balance and harmony within this cosmic order. Failure to uphold this responsibility disrupts social and ecological equilibrium, leading to disharmony and suffering. In this context, the plural divine pronoun also signals collective responsibility.

Kanyoro (2006, p. 101) states that stewardship in African theology is a shared practice, necessitating participation and governance that promotes justice and equity. Environmental care thus becomes a collective commitment, involving multiple stakeholders, including families and governments. This collective approach contrasts with privatised notions of resource management and foregrounds social accountability.

Moreover, the identity of humans as created in God's image implies moral accountability, not only to fellow humans but to God. This accountability includes a duty to God's justice, mercy, and care in environmental interactions. As Phiri and Nadar (2006, p. 27) contend, African theology insists that ecological responsibility cannot be divorced from issues of social justice, poverty alleviation, and sustainable development.

Thus, environmental stewardship is inseparable from pursuing human dignity and rights, making it a holistic ethical imperative. The mandate to steward creation is grounded in the divine image and is also a critique of exploitative capitalist and neoliberal models that prioritise economic gain over ecological health. African scholars such as Nkomazana and Kgosimore (2015, p. 89) argue that sustainable development in Africa requires a reorientation toward values that recognise the sacredness of life and the environment for an economy that respects ecological limits as a necessity for Africa's sustainable future.

Another issue discovered from this study is the mandate for sustainable dominion. The mandate to "fill the earth and subdue it," cited from the creation narrative, has traditionally been interpreted in ways that support human dominion over nature. However, a closer linguistic examination reveals a more understanding that frames this mandate as a call to responsible and sustainable stewardship rather than unchecked exploitation (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990, p. 119). This notion is not equivalent to wanton destruction or exploitation but implies governance that respects the created order and sustains its integrity. It involves the human role as the caretaker who exercises power with restraint, wisdom, and accountability. The mandate implies an principle of ordering creation in a way that flourishes for all life forms.

African theologians and ethicists contribute significantly to this mandate: dominion should be understood within relational responsibility. Kanyoro (2006, p. 99) challenges dominant Western interpretations that have historically justified environmental degradation under the guise of dominion. She insists that biblical dominion must be read alongside principles of stewardship, hospitality, and respect for the intrinsic value of creation. Such an approach with African indigenous ontologies, where humans are custodians rather than land owners (Hoppers, 2006, p. 45). This custodianship entails a moral duty to sustain ecological balance and promote the welfare of future generations.

Moreover, African ecological ethics underline the principle of *ubuntu*, a holistic sense of interconnectedness among humans, other creatures, and the environment (Ramose, 2002, p. 123). This philosophy suggests that dominion must be exercised to promote communal harmony and mutual flourishing rather than individualistic control.

Human authority over nature is legitimate only when it is in harmony with the cosmic order and respects the dignity of all life forms. This approach provides a corrective to exploitative development models that have led to environmental degradation across the continent.

The ecological imperative embedded in the mandate also entails maintaining biodiversity and ecosystem services that sustain life. Mung'ong'o and Oduor (2012, p. 67) argue, African environments

have traditionally been managed through balanced and sustainable practices, such as sacred groves and rotational farming systems.

These traditional systems embody an understanding that the earth is a gift entrusted to humanity, not a resource to be depleted recklessly. The mandate, therefore, calls for the restoration and conservation of ecosystems damaged by modern anthropogenic activities. Climate change and environmental crises are facing Africa, and there is an urgent need for a renewed understanding of sustainable development. Nkomazana and Kgosimore (2015, p. 90) stress that embracing a tenet of sustainable dominion is essential for addressing deforestation, land degradation, and water scarcity.

Economic growth and development risk becoming self-destructive without a theology that grounds human authority in care and respect for creation. Thus, this mandate must be the foundation for policies and practices that harmonise ecological preservation with human well-being (Chirenje 2013, p. 105).

Therefore, the command to "fill the earth and subdue it" must be understood as a mandate for sustainable dominion, responsible stewardship, ecological balance, and respect for the created order. This interpretation, supported by linguistic and African ethical perspectives, challenges exploitative tendencies and calls for a transformative ethic that sustains both the environment and humans.

There is also a provision indicative of a peaceful ecological order. The ecological narrative outlined in verses 29 and 30 is a providential arrangement whereby humans and animals share in a plant-based provision. This ordering is a state of original harmony in creation, one marked by mutual flourishing and nonviolence. The portrayal of this harmonious provision as a foundational ecological ideal is critical for contemporary environmental ethics and sustainable living. The text emphasises plant-based sustenance for humanity and animals in an ecological economy where predation and violence are absent.

This vision starkly contrasts current ecological realities characterised by resource scarcity, habitat destruction, and food insecurity, particularly pronounced in many African contexts (Beasley, 2014, p. 122). The peaceful coexistence depicted functions as a normative paradigm on how human consumption patterns and environmental interactions might be with this original ecological peace.

From a perspective, this provision signals a world ordered by divine intention, where the sustenance of all creatures is interdependent and balanced. As Tilley (2008, p. 58) suggests, the text embodies a covenantalism in which creation's well-being is intrinsically linked to human stewardship and ethical responsibility. This challenges anthropocentric exploitative attitudes, proposing instead an ecological ethic that values life in its diversity and interrelatedness.

African ecological thought provides additional layers of meaning to this peaceful ecological order. Many African indigenous cosmologies emphasise harmony and balance between humans and nature, viewing the earth as a relational system where each element supports the others (Odejide, 2009, p. 77). This worldview has the biblical depiction of provision, where human survival depends not on domination but on participation within a balanced ecological system.

The emphasis on plant-based provision also has critical engagement with contemporary African environmental challenges such as deforestation, overgrazing, and soil degradation, which undermine the capacity of ecosystems to sustain life (Ogundiran, 2016, p. 143). As implied in the text, sustainable use of vegetation encourages agricultural practices that are attuned to ecological limits and promote regeneration rather than depletion.

Traditional African agro ecological practices, including intercropping and agroforestry, illustrate the practical application of this principle, maintaining soil fertility and biodiversity (Njoya & Agama,

2010, p. 95)- the notion of a peaceful ecological order on human dietary practices and their environmental impact. Current global environmental discourse focuses on the ecological costs of meat-heavy diets, including greenhouse gas emissions, and water use (Steinfeld et al., 2006).

Nkrumah (2017, p. 110) argue for culturally sensitive approaches to food systems that integrate traditional plant-based diets with modern sustainability concerns.

The text also points to a holistic ecological balance where food provision extends beyond mere survival to encompass the flourishing of all creatures. According to Moyo (2013, p. 212), sustainable environmental management in Africa must be grounded in principled paradigms that recognise the intrinsic value of all life forms and promote coexistence. The peaceful order depicted in the text is a corrective to anthropocentric paradigms that have historically justified environmental exploitation. In addressing the modern challenges of environmental degradation and food insecurity, the model of peaceful is a foundation for stewardship practices prioritising ecological balance, biodiversity respect, and equitable resource distribution.

E. APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Environmental stewardship constitutes the deliberate engagement of humans in the responsible management and care of the earth's ecosystems. It entails an ethical, cultural, and spiritual commitment to preserve the integrity and sustainability of the natural world for current and future generations. In Africa, environmental stewardship is by mandates, indigenous worldviews, and socio-economic realities, forming a foundation for a holistic and sustainable approach.

The concept of stewardship within Africa is based on the understanding that humanity's role in creation is divinely delegated and inherently relational. African Christian theology views stewardship as a sacred trust, God's character of care, justice, and sustenance (Nyasha, 2014, p. 23). Stewardship, therefore, is an active participation in God's ongoing creative and sustaining work, not a privilege for dominion devoid of responsibility.

Eze (2008) articulates a relational ethic wherein humans are perceived as caretakers integrally connected to all life forms. This interconnectedness is not merely ecological but also spiritual, the divine origin and sustenance of all creation. He insists that this stewardship compels a respect for the intrinsic value of every creature, as all are parts of a divinely ordered cosmos sustained by God's providence and grace. This view is consistent with a non-anthropocentric understanding of creation, where the welfare of the environment and non-human life forms is essential to the flourishing of the whole.

Moreover, the communal dimension of stewardship within African thought cannot be overstated. As Bujo (2001) explains, African religious and cultural worldviews conceive of human beings as members of a cosmic one that includes ancestors, nature, and the divine. This ontology contrasts sharply with Western individualistic paradigms that isolate human beings from the natural world.

From the African perspective, environmental stewardship is a collective responsibility based on solidarity and mutual care. It implies that harm done to the environment disrupts social harmony and spiritual well-being, affecting the entire (Bujo, 2001, p. 46). In this light, environmental stewardship is a duty to God and a moral imperative to one's and future generations.

Thus, the foundation of stewardship in Africa integrates divine mandate, communal ethics, and respect for the integrity of creation into a holistic. Consequently, African theologians argue that stewardship involves transforming human attitudes and practices according to God's intentions for creation (Magesa, 2014, p. 78). Such stewardship is therefore a form of discipleship, God's justice and mercy in how humans relate to the environment.

Another approach is Indigenous ecological knowledge (IEK) which is foundational in developing sustainable environmental stewardship strategies across Africa. In centuries of observation, interaction, and adaptation to local ecosystems, IEK encompasses a body of wisdom, practices, and beliefs that sustain ecological balance (Fry, 2016, p. 112). These indigenous systems are embedded in social and spiritual, creating a holistic worldview where nature and humanity coexist in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Many Africans maintain sacred groves and forests for spiritual purposes and critical ecological functions, such as biodiversity conservation, watershed protection, and climate regulation (Akinyemi & Ogundele, 2019, p. 89). Such sacred natural sites are preserved through customary laws and taboos that forbid indiscriminate exploitation, a communal ethic of care and respect for nature that transcends utilitarian considerations.

Traditional agroforestry techniques, crop rotation, and soil conservation methods employed by indigenous farmers demonstrate sophisticated knowledge of sustainable resource management adapted to local climatic and soil conditions (Tibebe, 2015).

Odora Hoppers (2002) argues that the marginalisation or outright neglect of IEK in contemporary environmental governance undermines local agency and risks the imposition of Western scientific paradigms that are ill-suited to Africa's socio-cultural realities and ecological contexts. Such top-down models ignore the ecological relationships known to indigenous people, leading to resistance and failed conservation efforts (Odora Hoppers, 2002, p. 67).

Thus, integrating IEK with scientific knowledge is not merely an additive process but a necessary epistemological shift that respects pluralistic knowledge systems—the synergy between IEK and modern environmental science provides practical benefits. For example, indigenous fire management practices have been recognised for their role in reducing wildfire risk and maintaining biodiversity, which are valuable for contemporary ecological management (Mistry et al., 2020).

Likewise, indigenous water harvesting and soil fertility techniques provide adaptive strategies for coping with climate variability that complement technological interventions (Berkes, 2018). The empowerment of local through participatory conservation approaches, stewardship in cultural identity and social cohesion (Pretty, 2003). Masoga and Molefe (2017) argue that policies integrating IEK ownership of environmental initiatives are critical for their long-term success and sustainability.

Also, effective environmental stewardship in Africa requires more than policy and technological solutions; it necessitates widespread public awareness and education that an intrinsic sense of ecological responsibility. Education is vital for cultivating ecological literacy, equipping individuals with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to engage sustainably with their environments (Ogutu, 2015, p. 48).

This ecological literacy is crucial for understanding environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion, empowering us to make informed decisions and adopt sustainable practices. However, formal education systems across the continent lack comprehensive integration of environmental education in curricula, particularly at primary and secondary levels. Incorporating environmental studies into formal schooling nurtures early awareness of the interconnectedness between human activities and environmental health, future generations' attitudes toward sustainability (Makinde, 2017).

Beyond formal schooling, informal education through workshops, public campaigns, and media is critical in reaching diverse populations, primarily rural areas with limited access to formal education (Wamukonya, 2018).

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) and local traditional leaders are influential in promoting environmental awareness and action in African societies. Given the high prevalence of religious adherence across the continent, environmental messaging framed within spiritual and moral paradigms tends to resonate with many individuals (Kanyama & Akullo, 2020). These organisations operate at the grassroots level, blending religious teachings with ecological principles, stewardship as a moral obligation and part of a divinely ordained mandate. For example, the African Faith and Justice Network has shown how education linked with environmental ethics inspires congregations to participate in reforestation and waste management initiatives (Munyua, 2016). Capacity building is essential for translating awareness into tangible stewardship practices. This involves equipping members with practical skills in sustainable agriculture, natural resource management, water conservation, and renewable energy utilisation (Mungai & Kamau, 2019): training programs that are context-specific and culturally sensitive, ownership of environmental projects, sustainability and local relevance. The link between education, awareness, and environmental stewardship also intersects with issues of gender and youth empowerment. Women and young people constitute a proportion of those directly dependent on natural resources and are thus critical stakeholders in conservation efforts. Targeted education and capacity-building programs that include these groups help to dismantle social barriers and enable participation in environmental (Oduro & Boakye, 2020).

Furthermore, environmental stewardship in Africa requires governance structures and coherent policies that facilitate the sustainable management of natural resources and accountability in their use. The continent's environmental challenges are compounded by institutional weaknesses, including limited enforcement capacity, governance deficits, and competing economic priorities that undermine conservation efforts (Nhamo, 2017, p. 88).

These systemic problems within public administration and political will manifest in inadequate regulatory oversight and weak implementation of environmental laws. Effective stewardship depends on strong legal and institutional mechanisms that articulate clear mandates for environmental protection, define roles and responsibilities, and provide sanctions for non-compliance (Ostrom, 2009).

In many African countries, environmental legislation exists but suffers from gaps between policy formulation and enforcement, due to resource constraints and corruption (Nhamo, 2017).

Multi-level governance approaches encouraging cooperation between national governments, local authorities, civil society organisations, and indigenous peoples have shown promise in addressing ecological problems. These multi-stakeholder partnerships facilitate the pooling of resources, knowledge sharing, and conservation objectives with local socio-economic realities (Agyeman & Okyere, 2021, p. 61). For example, -based natural resource management (CBNRM) initiatives in Southern Africa illustrate how decentralisation and local participation improve accountability and ecological outcomes by empowering people to manage resources sustainably (Fabricius et al., 2001).

Policy coherence that integrates environmental conservation with poverty alleviation and economic development is critical for sustainable outcomes. Africa's developmental needs place pressure on natural resources, making it necessary to balance growth with ecological sustainability (Agyeman & Okyere, 2021). This integration demands that environmental policies cannot be developed in isolation but

with national development plans, poverty reduction strategies, and international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063 (Mafongoya et al., 2020).

International partnerships and donor-funded programs provide technical assistance, funding, and capacity-building for African environmental governance. However, these initiatives must be context-sensitive and locally led to avoid perpetuating dependency or disregarding indigenous knowledge and priorities (Chanza, 2013).

Strengthening institutional support also involves political will and leadership prioritising ecological health over short-term economic gains.

E. CONCLUSION

This study sought to examine the ecological perspective inherent in the creation narrative of Genesis 1:26-30 and its application as a foundation for environmental stewardship, particularly within the African context. Through exegetical analysis, the passage reveals a mandate that establishes humanity's unique identity as image-bearers of the divine, endowed with authority and responsibility over creation. This stewardship is not one of exploitative dominion but of sustainable, relational care grounded in divine intention and ongoing providential sustenance.

The study shows that human stewardship involves an ethic of responsible dominion, which calls for the maintenance of ecological balance and respect for the integrity of all created life. Providing plant-based sustenance for humans and animals illustrates an original creation order characterised by harmony and mutual flourishing, a normative ecological model contrasting with the degraded realities of post-fall environmental crises. Moreover, the divine speech acts within the passage continue divine involvement in creation and human participation in this ongoing creative and sustaining activity.

In the African context, these implications are as follows: Integrating indigenous ecological knowledge with contemporary scientific approaches provides a culturally relevant and pragmatic pathway toward sustainable environmental management.

The communal orientation of stewardship in African cosmologies is interconnectedness and shared responsibility, thereby enriching global discourses on environmental ethics. The study recognises the critical role of education, governance, and institutions in operationalising stewardship mandates.

Public awareness, capacity building, and policy coherence with ecological and socio-economic objectives are essential to mitigate the continent's environmental challenges. Individuals' spiritual and moral renewal emerges as a dimension, religious worldviews attitudes and motivate sustainable behaviours that transcend utilitarian concerns, framing environmental care as a moral vocation.

The findings affirm that addressing Africa's environmental crises requires a holistic approach that harmonises principles, indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and socio-political strategies. This integrated model holds promise for ecology and sustainable development. This study advocates for environmental stewardship as a sacred trust and a practical imperative that demands commitment, communal engagement, and transformative action. Embracing this stewardship paradigm contributes to healing the planet, sustaining livelihoods, and securing the well-being of current and future generations within Africa and beyond.

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