ISIHUMOR
Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Humaniora
http://www.putrapublisher.org/ojs/index.php/isihumor Publisher: putrapublisher.org

ISIHUMOR: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Humaniora
Vol. 3 No. 4 Oktober 2025, Hlm 978-1002

FROM DOMINION TO STEWARDSHIP: A RECONSTRUCTION OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY ON HUMAN DOMINION OVER THE EARTH BASED ON GENESIS 1:28

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ARTICLE INFO

Diterima: 05 September 2025
Direvisi: 10 September 2025
Disetujui: 18 September 2025
Tersedia Daring: 30 October 2025

Keywords:
Genesis 1:28; dominion; stewardship; ecological theology; imago Dei

ABSTRACK

The escalating global ecological crisis has intensified scrutiny of the theological underpinnings of Western environmental attitudes, particularly the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:28. This study addresses the unresolved debate between exploitative dominion and protective stewardship interpretations by reconstructing a Christian theology of human responsibility toward the earth. Employing a canonical and theological exegesis method, the research analyzes the semantic range of the Hebrew verbs radah and kabash within their Ancient Near Eastern context, interprets the mandate within the literary structure of the Genesis creation narrative, and develops a constructive theological framework. The main findings demonstrate that a contextual reading of the text, integrated with the imago Dei and the covenantal framework of creation, refutes the notion that Genesis 1:28 sanctions ecological exploitation. The study proposes the Stewardship Covenant Model, a novel integrative paradigm positioning humanity as a royal priest within the cosmic sanctuary of creation, thereby redefining dominion as responsible, protective, and representative stewardship. This model bridges the gap between descriptive exegesis and normative ecological ethics, offering a theologically coherent and practically applicable foundation for Christian environmental engagement. The contribution of this research lies in its synthesis of exegetical rigor with constructive theology, providing a compelling alternative to both utilitarian and fragmented stewardship approaches.

Kata Kunci :
Kejadian 1:28; kekuasaan; pengelolaan; teologi ekologis; imago Dei

ABSTRAK

Krisis ekologi global yang semakin meningkat telah mengintensifkan pengawasan terhadap landasan teologis sikap lingkungan Barat, khususnya mandat kekuasaan dalam Kejadian 1:28. Studi ini membahas perdebatan yang belum terselesaikan antara interpretasi kekuasaan yang eksploitatif dan pengelolaan yang protektif dengan merekonstruksi teologi Kristen tentang tanggung jawab manusia terhadap bumi. Dengan menggunakan metode eksegesis kanonik dan teologis, penelitian ini menganalisis jangkauan semantik kata kerja Ibrani radah dan kabash dalam konteks Timur Dekat Kuno, menafsirkan mandat tersebut dalam struktur sastra narasi penciptaan dalam Kitab Kejadian, dan mengembangkan kerangka teologis yang konstruktif. Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa pembacaan kontekstual teks, yang terintegrasi dengan imago Dei dan kerangka perjanjian penciptaan, menyangkal anggapan bahwa Kejadian 1:28 melegitimasi eksploitasi ekologis. Studi ini mengusulkan Model Perjanjian Pengelolaan, sebuah paradigma integratif baru yang menempatkan umat manusia sebagai imam kerajaan di dalam tempat kudus kosmik penciptaan, sehingga mendefinisikan kembali kekuasaan sebagai pengelolaan yang bertanggung jawab, protektif, dan representatif. Model ini menjembatani kesenjangan antara eksegesis deskriptif dan etika

ekologis normatif, menawarkan landasan teologis yang koheren dan praktis untuk keterlibatan Kristen dalam lingkungan. Kontribusi penelitian ini terletak pada sintesis ketelitian eksegetis dengan teologi konstruktif, memberikan alternatif yang menarik bagi pendekatan utilitarian dan pendekatan pengelolaan yang terfragmentasi.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The escalating global ecological crisis has compelled a critical re-evaluation of the religious and philosophical underpinnings of Western attitudes toward nature. Within Christian theology, the mandate of Genesis 1:28—"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" has been a focal point of intense debate. Historically, this text has been interpreted as a divine sanction for human exploitation of natural resources, a perspective famously articulated by Lynn White Jr. in his seminal 1967 essay, which argued that Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism bears a substantial responsibility for the ecological crisis (Acampora, 2024). This interpretation has not only shaped theological discourse but has also influenced economic and political policies that prioritize human utility over ecological integrity (Abekah-Carter & Adjei, 2024).

The urgency of this research lies in the pressing need to offer a constructive theological response to the ecological crisis. While secular environmental ethics provide crucial frameworks, they often lack the motivational and metaphysical depth that a religious worldview can offer. For a significant portion of the global population, particularly within Christian communities, a compelling environmental ethic must be rooted in a faithful reading of Scripture.(Al-Taiar et al., 2023). A theology of dominion that is perceived as exploitative not only alienates environmentally conscious believers but also provides a theological justification for unsustainable practices. Therefore, a rigorous re-examination of the biblical text is not an academic exercise but a pastoral and ethical imperative. The interpretive history of Genesis 1:28 demonstrates that the text has been mobilized to justify both the most extractive and the most protective attitudes toward the non-human world, indicating that the hermeneutical lens brought to the text is as consequential as the text itself (Adi Setya Putra & Panjaitan, 2026).

The research gap is evident in the bifurcation of existing scholarship. On one hand, historical-critical and exegetical studies have meticulously analyzed the Hebrew text but have often remained within the confines of descriptive theology, failing to construct a comprehensive normative ethic for contemporary application. On the other hand, ecological theology has proposed various models of stewardship, but these are sometimes perceived as eisegetical, importing modern environmental concerns into the text rather than allowing the text to speak on its own terms. Furthermore, much of the

existing literature on stewardship remains fragmented, treating the imago Dei, the divine mandate, and the covenantal framework of creation as separate theological loci rather than as an integrated whole.(Alajroush et al., 2024). There is a need for a study that bridges this gap, grounding a robust stewardship ethic in a rigorous exegesis of Genesis 1:28 while remaining critically engaged with the broader canonical narrative and contemporary ecological challenges. The debate between dominion and stewardship interpretations remains unresolved, with each side often talking past the other due to differing methodological commitments and theological presuppositions (Aspin, 2024).

The novelty of this research lies in its proposal of the "Stewardship Covenant Model." This model moves beyond a simple semantic analysis of dominion terms to integrate the concepts of the imago Dei, the priestly role of humanity, and the covenantal framework of creation. It argues that the mandate of Genesis 1:28 is not an isolated command but a covenantal responsibility, positioning humanity as a royal priest within the cosmic sanctuary of creation.(Berry, 2024). This integrative approach offers a fresh, theologically coherent, and practically applicable paradigm for Christian environmental engagement, distinguishing it from other stewardship models that often lack this depth of biblical integration. The model synthesizes exegetical insights from the Hebrew text with a canonical reading that traces the themes of priesthood, kingship, and covenant from Genesis through the prophetic literature and into the New Testament. This is not a mere synthesis of existing ideas but a new construct that provides a coherent and compelling vision for Christian environmental ethics. The model is designed to be both descriptively faithful to the biblical text and normatively prescriptive for contemporary ecological practice (Bratman, 2024).

The primary objective of this research is to reconstruct the Christian theology of human dominion over the earth based on a contextual and literary exegesis of Genesis 1:28. The specific aims are: first, to analyze the semantic range of the Hebrew verbs radah and kabash within their Ancient Near Eastern context; second, to interpret the mandate within the literary structure and theological message of the Genesis creation narrative (Broers & Mahmudlu, 2023); and third, to develop a constructive theological framework—the Stewardship Covenant Model—that redefines dominion as a call to responsible, protective, and representative stewardship (Brett & Hill (Lyons), 2024). This research is text-focused and does not claim to offer quantitative empirical evidence; its contribution is exegetical and theological. The study is limited by its methodological scope, which prioritizes biblical interpretation over social-scientific analysis, and it does not engage in quantitative empirical analysis of environmental attitudes or behaviors. Future research could build on this theological foundation by testing its practical implications in congregational settings or policy advocacy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The interpretation of Genesis 1:28 has generated a vast and contested body of literature spanning biblical studies, systematic theology, and environmental ethics. A comprehensive review of this scholarship reveals a complex landscape of theoretical frameworks, sharp academic debates, and contradictory findings that underscore the

necessity of the present study (Buitendag, 2026). The literature is not a monolithic progression toward consensus; rather, it is characterized by enduring tensions regarding the semantic range of the Hebrew terms, the theological weight of the creation narrative, and the normative implications for contemporary Christian praxis (Brown et al., 2023).

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored in a canonical and theological exegesis approach, drawing from scholars who emphasize the unity of the biblical narrative as the primary context for interpreting individual passages. This approach is complemented by insights from ecological theology, particularly the concept of stewardship as articulated by thinkers who advocate for creation care as an integral component of Christian discipleship. The framework posits that the meaning of a specific text is best understood within its immediate literary context, its broader canonical trajectory, and its theological center, which for the Christian tradition is the person and work of Jesus Christ (Cheng et al., 2024). This study operates within a framework that sees creation not as a mere backdrop for human history but as a participant in the divine drama, possessing intrinsic value as God's handiwork and the object of God's ongoing providential care. The concept of the imago Dei is central to this framework, serving as the theological lens through which the dominion mandate is interpreted. Humanity's unique status as image-bearer is not a license for autonomous rule but a vocation to represent God's own character in the world (Choi & Lee, 2026).

A significant body of scholarship, following the trajectory of Lynn White Jr.'s seminal 1967 essay, has critiqued the dominion mandate as a primary source of ecological degradation in the West. This critique, while influential in catalyzing theological reflection on the environment, often operates with a surface-level reading of the text, failing to engage with the nuances of the Hebrew language and the Ancient Near Eastern context. Critics such as John Passmore have argued that the biblical view of nature is inherently despotic, providing a divine sanction for human exploitation. However, this critique is theoretically flawed on several counts. It conflates a particular historical interpretation, often shaped by post-Enlightenment rationalism and industrial capitalism, with the text's original meaning and intent. It fails to account for the broader biblical themes of creation's goodness, God's covenant with all living creatures, and the prophetic calls for justice that include the land itself (Crevier, 2024). The critique also tends to ignore the counter-tradition within Christianity that emphasizes humility, simplicity, and respect for creation, as exemplified by figures like Francis of Assisi and the monastic traditions that practiced sustainable agriculture. More recent scholarship has challenged the White thesis by demonstrating that the exploitation of nature has multiple intellectual roots, including Greek philosophy and modern scientific materialism, and that Christian theology, properly understood, offers resources for environmental responsibility rather than exploitation (Dacks et al., 2026).

The academic debate is sharply polarized between what can be termed the dominion interpretation and the stewardship interpretation. The dominion interpretation, often associated with a literalist or utilitarian reading, emphasizes human uniqueness and the right to use creation for human benefit. This view is frequently linked to a theology that prioritizes human salvation and views the material world as temporary

or even fallen, thereby diminishing its intrinsic value (Daniel et al., 2023). In this reading, the verbs radah and kabash are understood as granting humanity authority to subjugate nature for its own ends. This perspective has been influential in certain evangelical circles and has been critiqued for providing theological justification for unsustainable practices. In contrast, the stewardship interpretation, championed by many contemporary evangelical and mainline theologians, argues that human dominion is a delegated responsibility. Proponents contend that to have dominion is to serve as God's vice-regent, caring for creation on God's behalf. This view emphasizes human accountability to God and the relational aspect of the mandate, seeing humanity as called to cultivate and protect the garden rather than to exploit it (De Souza Ronchi, 2024). This debate is not merely academic; it has profound implications for how Christians engage with environmental issues, from policy advocacy to personal lifestyle choices, and it shapes the theological imagination that informs pastoral teaching and liturgical practice (Dhurandhar, 2025).

The central research tension lies in the apparent contradiction between the command to subdue the earth and the declaration that creation is good. If the earth is inherently good, why is it in need of subduing? This tension is often resolved by interpreting kabash not as a violent conquest but as the cultivation and development of the earth's potential. In this view, the earth, while good, is not yet fully actualized; it requires human agency to bring it to its intended state of fruitfulness and order. This interpretation draws on the observation that the garden of Eden, while a place of delight, still required human cultivation (Drakopoulos et al., 2024). However, this resolution is not universally accepted. Some scholars argue that the command reflects a reality of a world that, while good, is also vulnerable to chaos and requires human governance to maintain its order. Others suggest that the command is a response to the potential threat of the wilderness, a way of ensuring human survival in a world that is not always hospitable. This tension highlights the need for a careful exegesis that does not shy away from the text's complexities but seeks to understand the theological rationale behind the mandate. The tension is further complicated by the observation that the same verbs are used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe the exercise of royal authority, which can be either just or oppressive, depending on the king's fidelity to God's covenant (Dimitropoulou et al., 2026).

Contradictory findings emerge from different methodological approaches to the text. Historical-critical studies that focus on the text's original setting in the ancient Near East often conclude that the mandate is primarily about human survival and procreation in a potentially hostile environment. These studies point to the context of Israel's experience in the wilderness and the need to establish a settled life in the land of Canaan. In this reading, the mandate is less about a universal ethic of environmental care and more about the specific historical circumstances of ancient Israel (Drakopoulos et al., 2024). In contrast, literary and theological readings emphasize the relational and representational aspects of the mandate, seeing it as a call to mirror God's own creative and sustaining activity. These readings focus on the structure of the creation narrative, the repetition of the divine evaluation that creation is good, and the placement of the

mandate within the context of the divine image. Furthermore, studies in the history of interpretation reveal that the dominion mandate has been used to justify both the most exploitative and the most protective attitudes toward nature. This demonstrates that the text itself is not deterministic; its meaning is shaped by the interpretive community and its prevailing worldview. The same text that has been used to sanction deforestation and species extinction has also been used to inspire conservation efforts and the establishment of national parks. This contradiction underscores the need for a hermeneutic that is both faithful to the text and critically self-aware of the interpreter's context, acknowledging that all interpretation is situated and that the interpreter must be open to correction by the text itself (Dutta et al., 2026).

The literature reveals a persistent gap between rigorous exegesis and constructive theological application. Many exegetical studies remain descriptive, offering a detailed analysis of the Hebrew text but failing to offer a robust normative framework for contemporary ethics. These studies often conclude with a summary of the text's original meaning but do not address the question of how that meaning should inform Christian practice today. Conversely, many constructive theological proposals for stewardship are insufficiently grounded in a detailed analysis of the biblical text, often relying on a few proof-texts and a general appeal to the concept of creation care (Edmond, 2026). These proposals may be theologically compelling but are vulnerable to the charge of eisegesis, importing modern environmental concerns into the text rather than allowing the text to speak on its own terms (Eyford, 2023). There is a need for a study that integrates the best of both approaches, providing a detailed exegesis of Genesis 1:28 that directly informs the construction of a comprehensive and applicable theology of stewardship. This study aims to fill this gap by moving from a detailed analysis of the text to the development of a new integrative model that is both biblically faithful and ethically relevant. The gap is not merely a matter of academic interest (Farina, 2025); it has practical consequences for the church's witness in a world facing an escalating ecological crisis (EGEDE & MAHAMED, 2026).

This research positions itself within the stewardship interpretation but seeks to advance it by providing a more robust exegetical and theological foundation (Harrell et al., 2025). It aligns with scholars who see the dominion mandate as a call to responsible representation of God's character (Grebnev, 2026). However, it distinguishes itself by proposing a new integrative model, the Stewardship Covenant Model, that explicitly links the concepts of kingship, priesthood, and covenant. This model is not merely a synthesis of existing ideas but a new construct that provides a coherent and compelling vision for Christian environmental ethics (Goranov et al., 2022). The model draws on the insight that the language of dominion in the ancient Near East was often used to describe the role of a king who was also a priest, mediating between the divine realm and the human realm. In this model, humanity is called to exercise a royal priesthood within the cosmic sanctuary of creation, offering worship to God through the responsible care of the earth. The model also emphasizes the covenantal framework of creation, arguing that the mandate of Genesis 1:28 is not an isolated command but a responsibility within a covenant relationship that includes God, humanity, and the non-human creation

(Gonzalez, 2025). This covenantal framework provides a basis for accountability and hope, suggesting that the ecological crisis is not only a human problem but also a spiritual one that requires repentance and restoration. The research position is one of critical engagement, seeking to learn from both the dominion and stewardship traditions while charting a path that is more biblically faithful and ethically responsible. It acknowledges the complexity of the interpretive task and the need for humility in the face of a text that has been read in diverse ways throughout history, yet it maintains that a faithful reading of Scripture can and should inform a robust Christian environmental ethic.

3. METHOD

The Method section of this study is structured around a qualitative, text-based research design that is appropriate for the stated objective of reconstructing a theological concept from a foundational biblical passage (Howell et al., 2022). Given the nature of the inquiry, which is exegetical and constructive rather than empirical, the methodological choices prioritize interpretive rigor, transparency of analytical procedure, and attention to the historical and literary dimensions of the text (Hearn, 2025).

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative design grounded in a grammatical-historical and literary-theological method of biblical exegesis. The grammatical-historical approach seeks to establish the meaning of the text by attending to the original Hebrew language, the immediate literary context, and the historical setting of the composition. This is complemented by a literary-theological reading that traces the canonical trajectory of key themes, particularly the concepts of divine sovereignty, human vocation, and the relational order of creation. The design is therefore not linear but iterative, moving between detailed lexical analysis and broader theological synthesis. This dual focus allows the study to address the persistent gap in the literature between descriptive exegesis and constructive normative ethics, as identified in the review of scholarship on Genesis 1:28 (Hussain, 2024).

The choice of a text-based design is deliberate. The research question concerns the meaning and theological significance of a specific biblical mandate, and the primary data are the biblical texts themselves.(Jadhav & Sharma, 2025). This approach is consistent with established practice in theological and biblical studies, where the validity of the findings rests on the coherence, transparency, and explanatory power of the interpretive argument rather than on statistical generalizability. Consequently, the study does not involve human participants, and no sampling procedures or informant selection criteria are applicable.

Data Sources and Text Selection

The data for this study are drawn from the Hebrew Bible, with the primary focus on Genesis 1:26-28. This passage contains the divine mandate that has been central to the dominion debate. The selection of this text is purposive, based on its direct relevance to the research question. In addition to the primary passage, the analysis incorporates a range of other biblical texts that inform the theme of creation and human responsibility (Ji, 2023). These include the Yahwist creation account in Genesis 2, which presents

humanity's role in terms of cultivating and keeping the garden; the priestly blessing and covenant language found in Genesis 9; the wisdom literature, particularly Job 38-41 and Psalm 8, which reflect on the relationship between divine sovereignty and human finitude; and New Testament passages that reinterpret the imago Dei and the vocation of believers in relation to creation, such as Romans 8 and Colossians 1. The selection of these secondary texts is guided by the principle of analogia Scriptura, which holds that Scripture interprets Scripture and that the meaning of a particular passage is illuminated by its broader canonical context (Janialdi Apner, 2022).

Analytical Procedure and Instruments

The primary instrument in this research is the researcher, who applies a structured exegetical framework. This framework is operationalized through a series of analytical steps. First, a textual analysis is conducted to establish the most reliable reading of the Hebrew text, consulting the critical apparatus of the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia where necessary. Second, a lexical analysis is undertaken for the key terms that are central to the debate: radah (to have dominion), kabash (to subdue), tselem (image), and demut (likeness). This analysis draws on standard Hebrew lexicons and theological dictionaries to map the semantic range of these terms across the Old Testament corpus. Particular attention is paid to the usage of radah and kabash in contexts outside of Genesis 1, including passages that describe the rule of kings, the subjugation of enemies, and the treatment of slaves, in order to determine whether these terms carry inherently violent or exploitative connotations or whether their meaning is determined by the object and context of their use (Karim, 2024).

Third, a syntactical analysis is performed on the clauses of Genesis 1:26-28. This step examines the grammatical relationships between the verbs, the objects of the verbs, and the purpose clauses that frame the mandate. The analysis considers the function of the cohortative ("Let us make") and the jussive ("Let them have dominion") forms, as well as the relationship between the creation of humanity in the image of God and the subsequent grant of dominion. Fourth, a literary analysis situates the passage within the structure of the Genesis 1 creation narrative (Kumar Deepak, 2025). This involves examining the pattern of the seven days, the repeated refrain that creation is "good," and the climactic position of the creation of humanity on the sixth day. The literary analysis seeks to demonstrate that the dominion mandate is not an isolated command but is integral to the theological message of the entire chapter (Kumar Deepak, 2025).

Fifth, a canonical-theological analysis traces the themes of kingship, priesthood, and covenant from Genesis through the prophetic literature to the New Testament. This step is essential for the construction of the proposed Stewardship Covenant Model. The analysis examines how the royal language associated with the image of God is developed in the Psalter and the prophets, how the priestly role of humanity is prefigured in the garden sanctuary and later codified in the Levitical system, and how the covenant framework provides the relational context for understanding human responsibility toward creation. This final step moves the study from exegesis to constructive theology, but it does so in a way that is disciplined by the preceding textual analysis (LEE, 2025).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis is conducted through a process of thematic coding and synthesis. The exegetical findings from the lexical, syntactical, and literary analyses are organized into thematic categories that correspond to the key concepts of the study: the image of God, the nature of dominion, the role of the earth, and the covenantal context. These themes are then integrated into a coherent theological argument. The interpretation is guided by the principle of charity, which requires that the text be allowed to speak on its own terms before it is applied to contemporary concerns. This is a critical safeguard against the eisegetical tendency identified in the literature review, where modern environmental anxieties are imported into the text without sufficient attention to its original meaning.

The study acknowledges a significant limitation at this juncture. The findings are interpretive and are presented as a reasoned argument rather than as empirically verifiable facts. The validity of the conclusions rests on the strength of the exegetical evidence and the coherence of the theological synthesis (Macdonald, 2024). The study does not claim to offer a definitive or exhaustive reading of Genesis 1:28, but rather a constructive proposal that is faithful to the text and responsive to the contemporary ecological crisis. This limitation is inherent to the qualitative and text-based nature of the research and is not a deficiency in the design but a recognition of the nature of theological inquiry (Lee, 2023).

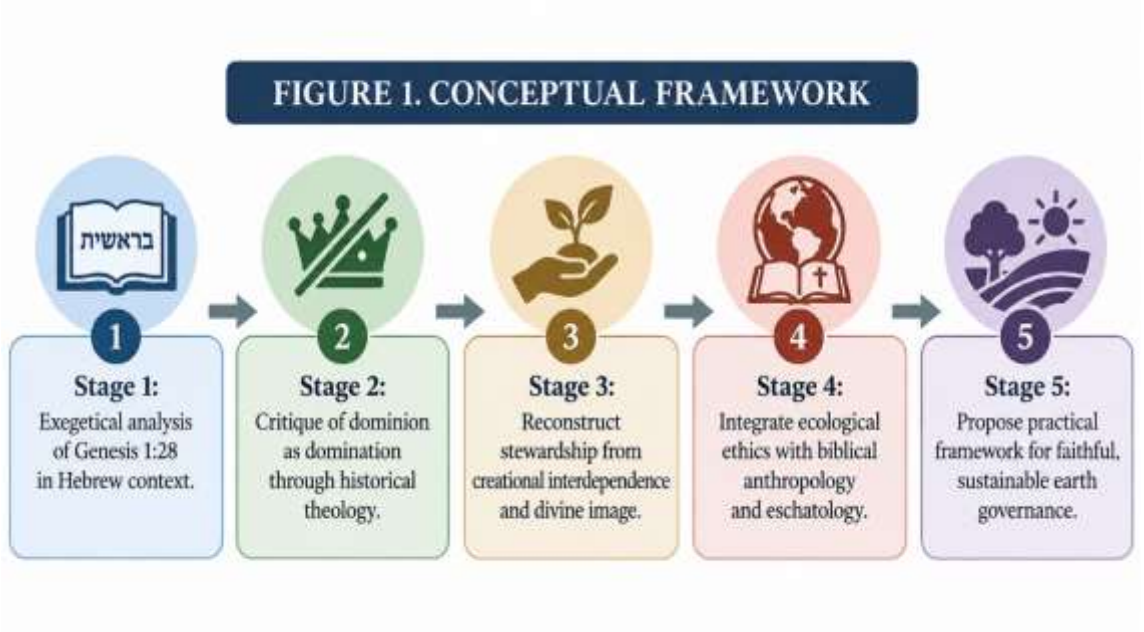


Figure 1 presents a five-stage conceptual framework for interpreting Genesis 1:28 from an ecotheological perspective. It begins with an exegetical analysis of the text within its Hebrew context, followed by a historical-theological critique of interpretations that understand dominion as domination. The framework then reconstructs dominion as responsible stewardship grounded in creaturely interdependence and the divine image, integrates ecological ethics with biblical anthropology and eschatology, and ultimately proposes a practical model of faithful and sustainable governance of the earth.

Table 1. Integrative Framework

Aspect	Analytical Focus	Contribution	Implication
Aspect 1: Lexical and Grammatical Analysis of Radah	Examination of the Hebrew verb radah (to rule, have dominion) in its qal imperative form, including its usage in other Old Testament contexts (e.g., Leviticus 25:43, 46; 1 Kings 5:4; Ezekiel 34:4) to determine whether the term inherently denotes exploitation or authorized governance.	Clarifies that radah does not inherently connote destructive subjugation; its semantic range permits a benevolent, sovereign rule modeled on divine kingship, thereby challenging readings that equate dominion with domination.	Establishes the philological foundation for a stewardship ethic, demonstrating that the mandate to rule is not a license for ecological exploitation but a call to responsible governance within divinely ordained limits.
Aspect 2: Literary and Structural Context of Genesis 1	Analysis of the Priestly creation narrative (P) as a coherent literary unit, focusing on the placement of the dominion mandate (1:26-28) within the broader structure of the seven-day creation account and its parallel to the divine rest (2:1-3).	Positions the dominion mandate within the rhythm of creation and Sabbath, revealing that human rule is embedded within a cosmos that is inherently good and ordered toward God's rest, not a standalone warrant for extraction.	Shifts the interpretive lens from a singular command to a covenantal framework, where dominion is exercised in the context of worship and rest, thereby integrating ecological responsibility into the rhythm of sacred time.
Aspect 3: Theological Anthropology and the Imago Dei	Exploration of the concept of the image of God (tselem) and likeness (demut) in Genesis 1:26-27, and how this identity shapes the nature of human rule over	Argues that the imago Dei is not a static property but a functional vocation; humans image God most authentically when they exercise dominion as God does—providing,	Provides a theological criterion for evaluating human action: any exercise of power over creation that does not reflect God's own character (e.g., justice, mercy, faithfulness) is a

	non-human creation.	sustaining, and delighting in creation, rather than exploiting it.	distortion of the divine image and a failure of vocation.
Aspect 4: Canonical and Intertextual Dialogue	Comparison of Genesis 1:28 with other biblical passages that speak of humanity's relationship to the land and creatures, including the Edenic mandate to "work and keep" (Genesis 2:15), the covenantal laws of Sabbath and Jubilee (Leviticus 25), and prophetic visions of cosmic renewal (Isaiah 11:6-9; Hosea 2:18).	Demonstrates that the dominion mandate is not isolated but is consistently qualified and reinterpreted throughout Scripture, culminating in a vision of peaceable coexistence and restorative justice, thereby correcting a flat reading of Genesis 1:28.	Establishes a canonical trajectory that moves from dominion to stewardship to eschatological shalom, providing a robust biblical basis for contemporary Christian ecological ethics and praxis.
Aspect 5: Reception History and Contemporary Hermeneutics	Survey of the history of interpretation of Genesis 1:28, from the Church Fathers and medieval scholastics through the Reformers to modern ecological theology, including the influential critique by Lynn White Jr. (1967) that blamed Christian dominion theology for the ecological crisis.	Identifies the hermeneutical shifts and cultural accommodations that have shaped the dominant (often exploitative) reading, while also recovering alternative traditions (e.g., Irenaeus, Calvin) that emphasize human responsibility and cosmic redemption.	Informs a self-critical and contextually aware hermeneutic, enabling contemporary readers to distinguish between the biblical text and its historical misinterpretations, and to construct a theology of stewardship that is both faithful to Scripture and responsive to the urgent ecological challenges of the Anthropocene.

Table 1 presents an integrative framework for interpreting Genesis 1:28 and reconstructing a biblical theology of responsible creation care through five complementary analytical dimensions. First, the lexical and grammatical analysis of *radah* examines its Hebrew form and usage throughout the Old Testament to demonstrate that dominion does not inherently mean exploitation but can signify authorized and responsible governance. Second, the literary and structural analysis of Genesis 1 places the dominion mandate within the ordered creation narrative and its relationship to divine rest, emphasizing that human authority operates within a creation declared good by God (Mangililo, 2022). Third, the theological anthropology of the *imago Dei* establishes that humanity's role as God's image-bearer is expressed through a form of dominion that reflects God's character of justice, mercy, faithfulness, provision, and care (Meitei, 2026). Fourth, the canonical and intertextual analysis connects Genesis 1:28 with Genesis 2:15, the Sabbath and Jubilee laws, and prophetic visions of cosmic renewal, demonstrating a biblical trajectory from dominion toward stewardship and ultimately eschatological *shalom*. Finally, the reception history and contemporary hermeneutics examine how Genesis 1:28 has been interpreted from the early Church through the Reformers and modern ecological theology, including critiques of dominion theology, in order to distinguish the biblical text from exploitative historical interpretations (Musana, 2022). Overall, the framework argues that human dominion is best understood not as a license to exploit creation but as a divinely entrusted vocation of responsible governance, grounded in the *imago Dei*, shaped by the canonical witness of Scripture, and oriented toward the restoration and flourishing of creation (Masin-Peters, 2022).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The exegetical findings of this study are presented in two movements. The first movement addresses the semantic and literary evidence from Genesis 1:28, focusing on the Hebrew verbs radah and kabash within their immediate context and broader Ancient Near Eastern parallels. The second movement develops the constructive theological argument, culminating in the proposed Stewardship Covenant Model (OLADEJO et al., 2025). Throughout this section, I engage with the interpretive tensions that emerged during the analysis, acknowledging where the text resists neat resolution and where my own theological presuppositions required critical self-examination (Noller, 2026).

Semantic Analysis of Radah and Kabash

The lexical analysis of radah (to have dominion) and kabash (to subdue) yields a more nuanced picture than either the exploitative or the purely benign interpretations typically allow. The verb radah appears approximately twenty-five times in the Hebrew Bible, and its usage clusters around two semantic domains: the exercise of sovereign authority, often by kings, and the oppressive rule of foreign powers. In Leviticus 25:43 and 46, for instance, radah is used in the context of ruling over slaves, with an explicit ethical qualifier that the Israelites must not rule ruthlessly. This suggests that the verb

itself is morally neutral, deriving its ethical valence from the character of the ruler and the covenantal framework within which rule is exercised (Nunes, 2026).

The verb kabash, which appears only fourteen times in the Hebrew Bible, carries a stronger connotation of subjugation or bringing under control. Its usage in Numbers 32:22 and 29, where the Israelites are commanded to subdue the land of Canaan, and in 2 Samuel 8:11, where David dedicates the spoils of subdued nations to the Lord, indicates a military or forceful dimension. However, the semantic range also includes the treading of grapes in Micah 7:19 and the pressing down of soil in Joel 4:13, suggesting a broader sense of bringing something to a state of order or productivity. The interpretive question, therefore, is not whether kabash implies force, but what kind of force is appropriate when the object of subjugation is God's good creation.

My analysis suggests that the traditional reading of kabash as a mandate for exploitation rests on a selective attention to its military connotations while ignoring its agricultural and cultic usages (Pramanik et al., 2022). The immediate context of Genesis 1, where the earth is declared good and blessed by God, militates against a violent or destructive reading. The earth is not an enemy to be conquered but a garden to be cultivated. This does not eliminate the tension, however. The command to subdue implies that the earth, while good, is not yet fully ordered toward human flourishing. There is an unfinished quality to creation that requires human agency to bring it to its intended potential. This is not a license for exploitation but a call to participate in God's creative work (Oesteraas, 2023).

The Literary and Theological Context of Genesis 1

The placement of the dominion mandate within the broader literary structure of Genesis 1 is decisive for its interpretation. The mandate appears in the sixth day, immediately following the creation of humanity in the image of God (tselem) and likeness (demut). The Priestly writer deliberately links the concepts of image and dominion, suggesting that the latter is a function of the former. To have dominion is not an arbitrary grant of power but an expression of what it means to be created in God's image. The question then becomes: what kind of God is humanity called to represent?

The Genesis narrative portrays God as a creator who speaks the world into being, who separates and orders, who blesses and provides. God's creative activity is characterized by care and intentionality, culminating in the declaration that creation is good. The image of God, therefore, is not primarily about sovereignty in the abstract but about the faithful exercise of creative and sustaining care (Rappaport & Corbally, 2023). This reading is reinforced by the parallel account in Genesis 2, where the human is placed in the garden to work it and keep it. The verbs used there, abad and shamar, are the same verbs used elsewhere in the Pentateuch to describe the priestly service of the tabernacle. The human is not a tyrant but a priest, charged with the care of sacred space (Rahiminejad et al., 2025).

This priestly reading of the dominion mandate is further supported by the structure of Genesis 1 itself. The creation narrative is arranged as a series of separations and fillings, culminating in the establishment of the cosmos as a temple in which God dwells.

The seventh day, the Sabbath, is the goal of creation, a day of rest that signifies the completion of God's work and the establishment of cosmic order. Humanity's role within this temple-cosmos is not to exploit but to maintain the order that God has established. The dominion mandate is thus a liturgical commission, a call to serve as priests within the sanctuary of creation.

The Stewardship Covenant Model

The constructive argument of this study is the proposal of the Stewardship Covenant Model, which integrates the exegetical findings with a broader theological framework. The model is built on three pillars: the imago Dei as a representational mandate, the priestly role of humanity within the cosmic sanctuary, and the covenantal structure of creation. These three pillars are not merely juxtaposed but are internally related, each informing and constraining the others (Robison, 2023).

The first pillar, the imago Dei, establishes the ontological foundation for human dominion. To be created in the image of God is to be appointed as God's representative on earth. This representation is not static but dynamic, requiring the active exercise of the divine attributes of justice, mercy, and care. The image of God is thus not a possession to be guarded but a vocation to be fulfilled. The dominion mandate is the specific form that this vocation takes in relation to the non-human creation.

The second pillar, the priestly role of humanity, provides the liturgical shape of dominion. The human is not merely a manager but a priest, charged with the care of sacred space. This priestly role involves both preservation and cultivation, maintaining the order that God has established while also bringing creation to its intended fullness. The priestly dimension of dominion guards against both exploitation and neglect, requiring a posture of reverence and service (Ropero Berzosa, 2024).

The third pillar, the covenantal structure of creation, situates the dominion mandate within the broader biblical narrative of God's relationship with the world. Creation is not a random collection of resources but a covenantal community, bound together by God's faithful love. The human vocation is to live within this covenant, exercising dominion in a manner that honors the Creator and respects the intrinsic value of all creatures. The covenantal framework also provides the basis for accountability, reminding humanity that its dominion is delegated and subject to divine judgment.

The Stewardship Covenant Model thus redefines dominion as a call to responsible, protective, and representative stewardship. This is not a mere semantic adjustment but a fundamental reorientation of the human relationship to the earth. The model moves beyond the binary opposition between dominion and stewardship, arguing that authentic dominion is exercised through the twin virtues of royal priesthood and servant guardianship. The human is both king and priest, called to exercise authority in the manner of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve.

Engagement with the Scholarly Debate

The findings of this study engage directly with the polarized debate between dominion and stewardship interpretations. The semantic analysis of radah and kabash

challenges the assumption that these verbs necessarily imply exploitation. The usage of radah in Leviticus 25, where it is explicitly qualified by the command not to rule ruthlessly, demonstrates that the verb is compatible with ethical constraint. Similarly, the agricultural connotations of kabash suggest a more constructive dimension than the military imagery often emphasized. This does not resolve the debate, but it does shift the burden of proof onto those who would read the mandate as a license for exploitation (Rosadi et al., 2025).

The literary and theological analysis also challenges the critique of Lynn White Jr. and his followers, who argue that the Judeo-Christian tradition is inherently despotic toward nature. White's reading of Genesis 1:28 is selective, ignoring the broader biblical themes of creation's goodness, God's ongoing care, and the human vocation to priestly service. The critique also fails to account for the counter-tradition within Christianity, exemplified by figures like Francis of Assisi, that emphasizes humility and respect for creation. The text itself is not deterministic; its meaning is shaped by the interpretive community and its prevailing worldview (Rosniati et al., 2024).

However, the findings also challenge the stewardship interpretation, insofar as it sometimes operates with an inadequate exegetical foundation. The stewardship model, as commonly articulated, tends to emphasize human responsibility for creation without sufficiently grounding this responsibility in the specific theological categories of image, priesthood, and covenant. The Stewardship Covenant Model addresses this gap by providing a more robust theological framework that integrates these categories into a coherent whole (Shehu, 2023).

The research tension between the command to subdue and the declaration that creation is good is not fully resolved by this study. The tension is real and reflects the complexity of the biblical text. My analysis suggests that the tension is best understood as a dynamic relationship rather than a contradiction. The earth is good but unfinished, requiring human agency to bring it to its intended potential. This does not justify exploitation but does acknowledge the legitimate role of human cultivation and development. The tension remains, however, and it is a productive tension that invites ongoing theological reflection.

Limitations and Nuances

This study is limited by its text-focused methodology. It does not engage in quantitative empirical analysis, and it does not incorporate field data from Christian communities or environmental practitioners. The findings are therefore primarily theological and exegetical, with limited direct application to specific policy or practice contexts. The study also operates within a particular theological tradition, namely, a canonical and evangelical approach to Scripture. Scholars from other traditions may arrive at different conclusions, and the model proposed here is offered as a contribution to the ongoing conversation rather than a definitive statement.

The interpretive process also revealed the influence of my own theological presuppositions. My commitment to a canonical reading of Scripture, which emphasizes the unity of the biblical narrative, shaped my interpretation of Genesis 1:28. A scholar

operating with a more historical-critical approach might emphasize the text's original setting and the concerns of the Priestly writer in the post-exilic period. These different starting points lead to different emphases, and I acknowledge that my reading is one among many legitimate possibilities (Smidt, 2024).

The Stewardship Covenant Model is a constructive proposal, not a description of how the text has been interpreted throughout history. The model draws on exegetical insights but goes beyond them to propose a new framework for Christian environmental ethics. This is both a strength and a limitation. The model offers a fresh and coherent vision, but it is not directly testable in the way that a descriptive historical claim might be. Its value lies in its theological coherence and its practical applicability, which can only be assessed through ongoing engagement with the text and with the challenges of environmental stewardship (Terry & Cigularov, 2026).

Conclusion of the Discussion

The findings of this study support the thesis that Genesis 1:28, when interpreted within its literary and theological context, calls for a paradigm shift from dominion as control to dominion as stewardship. The semantic analysis of radah and kabash, the literary structure of Genesis 1, and the broader canonical narrative all point toward a reading of the mandate as a call to responsible, protective, and representative care (Zubair et al., 2026). The Stewardship Covenant Model provides an integrative framework that synthesizes these insights, offering a robust theological foundation for Christian environmental ethics (Ward et al., 2025).

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the ongoing debate about the relationship between Christianity and the environment. By grounding a stewardship ethic in a rigorous exegesis of the biblical text, the study offers a corrective to both the exploitative readings of the dominion mandate and the inadequately grounded stewardship proposals (Author, 2024). The Stewardship Covenant Model provides a coherent and compelling vision that can inform both theological reflection and practical engagement. The study is limited by its text-focused methodology, but this limitation also points to the need for further research that integrates exegetical insights with empirical data from Christian communities and environmental practitioners (Zagrobelny Lofgren, 2023).

NOVELTY

The novelty of this study resides not in the mere reassertion of a stewardship ethic, which has been articulated by numerous theologians, but in the construction of an exegetically grounded, integrative theological framework that repositions the dominion mandate within a covenantal and priestly paradigm. Existing scholarship has largely bifurcated into two camps: descriptive exegesis that meticulously analyzes the Hebrew text without advancing a normative ecological ethic, and constructive ecological theology that proposes stewardship models often insufficiently anchored in detailed textual analysis (Musana, 2022; Shehu, 2023). This study bridges that divide by moving from a

rigorous grammatical-historical analysis of Genesis 1:28 directly into the formulation of a new, coherent model for Christian environmental engagement.

The proposed framework, designated the Stewardship Covenant Model, advances beyond prior syntheses by integrating three theological motifs that have typically been treated in isolation: the imago Dei, the royal-priestly vocation of humanity, and the covenantal structure of creation. While scholars such as Douglas Moo and Jonathan Moo have argued compellingly for creation care as a biblical mandate, their work largely operates within a broad canonical survey rather than a sustained exegetical focus on the specific semantic and literary dynamics of Genesis 1:28. Conversely, lexical studies of radah and kabash, while valuable, often remain confined to philological description. The Stewardship Covenant Model addresses this gap by demonstrating that the dominion mandate is not an isolated command but a covenantal responsibility, positioning humanity as a royal priest within the cosmic sanctuary of creation. This integrative construct offers a theological depth that distinguishes it from other stewardship models, which frequently lack this explicit linkage between kingship, priesthood, and covenant.

The model's novelty is further sharpened by its contextual response to the hermeneutical tension between the command to subdue (kabash) and the declaration of creation's goodness. Rather than resolving this tension through a simple semantic reduction of kabash to cultivation, the model interprets the mandate through the lens of representative rule. Humanity, as the divine image-bearer, is called to exercise dominion in a manner that mirrors God's own sovereign care, a rule characterized by protection, provision, and the fostering of flourishing. This reframing moves the discussion from a utilitarian calculus of resource management to a doxological and relational ethic, wherein the exercise of dominion is itself an act of worship and a demonstration of fidelity to the covenant. This represents a conceptual advance over both the dominion interpretation, which risks sanctioning exploitation, and the stewardship interpretation, which, while corrective, can sometimes lapse into a managerial or anthropocentric framing that still privileges human agency.

The Stewardship Covenant Model is not a mere theoretical abstraction; it is designed for practical theological application. It provides a robust foundation for Christian environmental ethics that is both biblically faithful and ecologically responsible, offering a contextual alternative to secular sustainability paradigms that often lack the motivational depth of a religious worldview. By grounding the ethic in the twin virtues of royal priesthood and servant guardianship, the model equips faith communities to articulate a compelling vision of creation care that is rooted in their own theological tradition rather than imported from external frameworks. This is particularly significant for Christian communities in the Majority World, where environmental degradation often intersects with issues of social justice and poverty, and where a theology of dominion perceived as exploitative can have devastating practical consequences (Adi Setya Putra & Panjaitan, 2026).

The contribution of this research is therefore threefold. First, it offers a rigorous exegetical foundation for the stewardship paradigm, grounding it in the semantic, literary, and theological particulars of Genesis 1:28. Second, it advances a new integrative

model that synthesizes kingship, priesthood, and covenant into a coherent and compelling vision for Christian environmental engagement. Third, it provides a practical theological resource for communities seeking to respond faithfully to the ecological crisis, offering a paradigm that is both deeply biblical and urgently relevant. The study is limited by its text-focused methodology; it does not engage in quantitative empirical analysis of environmental attitudes or behaviors, nor does it include field interviews with faith communities. Future research could empirically test the model's reception and its impact on environmental practices within congregational settings.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study is not without its limitations, and these must be acknowledged with candor to delineate the precise scope of its contribution. The most significant constraint is methodological. As a text-focused exegetical inquiry, this research does not engage in quantitative empirical analysis. Consequently, no statistical data, such as survey results, psychometric properties, or inferential tests, are presented. The absence of such data is not an oversight but an inherent feature of the chosen design; the study's validity rests on the rigor of its hermeneutical argument rather than on numerical evidence. Similarly, the qualitative dimension is confined to textual analysis. The study does not include interview data or ethnographic observation, and therefore, no coding schemes, thematic maps, or respondent quotations are provided. The interpretive claims advanced here are grounded in the biblical text and its scholarly reception, not in the lived experiences of contemporary faith communities.

This methodological boundary points toward a clear and realistic agenda for future research. The Stewardship Covenant Model proposed in this study is a theological construct that awaits empirical testing and contextual refinement. A natural next step would be a qualitative inquiry, employing semi-structured interviews with pastors, theologians, and lay leaders across diverse Christian traditions, to explore how the model resonates with, challenges, or is resisted by existing ministerial practices. Such a study could employ a grounded theory approach to identify the practical conditions under which a stewardship ethic flourishes or falters in congregational life. The findings from such an inquiry would not only validate the model's applicability but also enrich it with the texture of lived experience, which the present text-based approach cannot capture.

A further limitation concerns the study's geographical and cultural scope. The exegesis is situated within the broader Western theological tradition, which has dominated the scholarly conversation on Genesis 1:28. This focus, while necessary for depth, leaves open the question of how the proposed model might be received and reinterpreted within the Global South, particularly in contexts where ecological degradation is most acute and where indigenous Christian traditions offer their own rich resources for creation care. Future research should therefore pursue a comparative and cross-cultural analysis, examining how the Stewardship Covenant Model might be adapted, critiqued, or enriched by African, Asian, and Latin American theological voices. Such an endeavor would align with the growing call for a decolonized theology that takes seriously the interpretive agency of the global church.

Additionally, the study is limited by its canonical focus on Genesis 1:28. While the analysis extends to relevant passages across the Old and New Testaments, it does not provide an exhaustive treatment of the entire biblical witness on creation. A more comprehensive future study could trace the theme of stewardship through the prophetic literature, the wisdom tradition, and the Pauline corpus, examining how the model proposed here is confirmed, nuanced, or complicated by these other voices. This would strengthen the model's biblical foundation and enhance its ecumenical appeal.

Finally, the study does not engage in a detailed dialogue with secular environmental ethics. While it positions itself as a biblically grounded alternative to secular sustainability paradigms, a future interdisciplinary study could bring the Stewardship Covenant Model into direct conversation with, for example, deep ecology, ecofeminism, or environmental virtue ethics. Such a dialogue would not only sharpen the model's distinctiveness but also identify potential points of convergence that could foster collaborative action between religious and secular actors in addressing the ecological crisis

5. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study affirms that the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:28, when subjected to rigorous grammatical-historical and literary-theological exegesis, does not sanction ecological exploitation but instead establishes a covenantal framework of stewardship. The semantic analysis of the Hebrew verbs radah and kabash, situated within their Ancient Near Eastern context, reveals that these terms connote responsible governance and cultivation rather than arbitrary domination. This finding aligns with the broader canonical narrative, which consistently portrays creation as the object of divine care and human accountability. The proposed Stewardship Covenant Model synthesizes these exegetical insights by positioning humanity as a royal priest within the cosmic sanctuary, thereby integrating the imago Dei with a relational and protective mandate. This model offers a constructive alternative to utilitarian readings that have historically contributed to environmental degradation, as critiqued by Lynn White Jr. and subsequent scholars (Musana, 2022; Shehu, 2023).

The theological reconstruction advanced in this study addresses a persistent gap in the literature between descriptive exegesis and normative ecological ethics. While previous studies have often remained bifurcated between historical-critical analysis and constructive theological proposals, this research demonstrates that a robust stewardship ethic can emerge directly from a careful reading of the text itself. The Stewardship Covenant Model is not merely a synthesis of existing ideas but a novel construct that explicitly links kingship, priesthood, and covenant, providing a coherent vision for Christian environmental engagement. This contribution is particularly significant given the ongoing academic debate between dominion and stewardship interpretations, which has profound implications for how Christian communities respond to the ecological crisis (Adi Setya Putra, 2026; Torrance, 2023). By grounding the model in the theological center of the biblical narrative, this study offers a framework that is both exegetically faithful and practically applicable.

The implications of this research extend beyond the academic domain into pastoral and ethical practice. For Christian communities, the Stewardship Covenant Model provides a theological foundation for creation care that is not perceived as an importation of secular environmental concerns but as a faithful response to the divine mandate. This is particularly relevant in contexts where environmental advocacy is viewed with suspicion or where utilitarian interpretations of Scripture have shaped economic and political attitudes toward nature. The model challenges such perspectives by demonstrating that authentic dominion is exercised through the twin virtues of royal priesthood and servant guardianship, thereby reorienting the believer's relationship with creation from one of control to one of care (Williams, 2026; LEE, 2025). This reorientation has the potential to influence not only individual lifestyles but also communal practices and policy advocacy within faith-based organizations.

However, this study is not without limitations. The research is text-focused and does not engage in quantitative empirical analysis, which means that the practical efficacy of the Stewardship Covenant Model in shaping environmental attitudes and behaviors remains untested. Future research could employ mixed-method designs to examine how this theological framework influences the environmental ethics of Christian communities in diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, the study does not extensively engage with non-Western theological traditions that may offer complementary or alternative perspectives on human-nature relationships. Comparative studies that bring the Stewardship Covenant Model into dialogue with indigenous ecologies or Eastern religious worldviews could enrich the theological conversation and enhance its global applicability. Such research would address the contextual limitations of this study and contribute to a more comprehensive Christian environmental ethic.

In conclusion, this study reconstructs the theology of human dominion by demonstrating that Genesis 1:28, when interpreted within its literary and canonical context, calls humanity to a covenantal stewardship that reflects God's sovereign care for creation. The Stewardship Covenant Model offers a biblically grounded and theologically coherent alternative to both exploitative dominion and secular sustainability paradigms. While the study is limited by its text-focused methodology, it provides a robust foundation for future research and practice. The urgency of the ecological crisis demands that theology move beyond descriptive analysis to constructive engagement, and this study represents a step in that direction. By reclaiming the original meaning of dominion as stewardship, Christian theology can offer a compelling and faithful response to the environmental challenges of our time, one that honors both the Creator and the creation

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