

THE MEANING OF “RULING” AND “SUBDUING” THE EARTH IN GENESIS 1:28: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF HUMANITY’S RESPONSIBILITY FOR CREATION

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ABSTRACT

The interpretation of Genesis 1:28 remains pivotal in debates over biblical mandates for environmental ethics, particularly the contested semantics of the Hebrew verbs *radah* and *kabhash*. This study addresses the persistent research gap concerning the philological range and theological function of these terms within the Priestly creation narrative, moving beyond the binary of domination versus stewardship. Employing a historical-grammatical exegetical method complemented by canonical and ecological hermeneutical approaches, the study analyzes the Masoretic text within its ancient Near Eastern context. The analysis demonstrates that *radah* carries royal connotations of accountable governance rather than arbitrary exploitation, while *kabhash*, though often implying subjugation, functions within the creation narrative to denote responsible cultivation and ordering of the earth. The main findings challenge assumptions that the dominion mandate sanctions environmental degradation, instead revealing a theology of accountable governance. The study's novelty lies in proposing the "royal servanthood" hermeneutical model, which synthesizes royal imagery with the biblical servant motif to reframe humanity's role as accountable trustees. This model contributes to contemporary ecological ethics by offering faith communities an exegetically rigorous framework for creation care that integrates theological accountability with environmental responsibility.

Keywords: Genesis 1:28; dominion mandate; ecological hermeneutics; royal servanthood; creation care

INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of Genesis 1:28 has long occupied a critical juncture in the intersection of biblical theology, ethics, and environmental concern. The verse, which records the divine commission for humanity to "be fruitful and multiply," to "subdue" the earth, and to "have dominion" over its creatures, has been read in ways that range from a sanction for unrestrained resource extraction to a mandate for gentle custodianship. The Hebrew verbs at the center of this commission, *radah* and *kabhash*, carry a semantic weight that has been contested across centuries of exegesis and

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translation. The stakes of this interpretive debate are not merely academic. As the global ecological crisis deepens, faith communities continue to grapple with the question of whether their sacred texts offer resources for environmental healing or have contributed to the attitudes that produced the crisis in the first place. This study undertakes a philologically grounded and theologically critical exegesis of Genesis 1:28, with the aim of clarifying the meaning and function of these two verbs within their literary, historical, and theological contexts, and of proposing a hermeneutical model that can guide contemporary ecological responsibility.

The urgency of this inquiry is underscored by the enduring influence of Lynn White Jr.'s 1967 essay, which argued that the dominion mandate, as interpreted by Western Christianity, fostered an ethos of human exceptionalism and environmental exploitation. While White's thesis has been subjected to sustained critique and refinement, it remains a reference point for discussions of religion and ecology. The question of what Genesis 1:28 actually means, in its original context and for contemporary readers, is therefore not a matter of antiquarian curiosity but of practical consequence. A careful exegetical study that attends to the philological range of *radah* and *kabhash*, their usage across the Hebrew Bible, and their function within the Priestly creation narrative can contribute to a more responsible and theologically coherent ethic of creation care.

Despite the extensive literature on this passage, several gaps persist. Many studies treat *radah* and *kabhash* in isolation, without sufficient attention to their broader usage in the Hebrew Bible or their ancient Near Eastern background. The royal and military connotations of these terms are often acknowledged but not systematically integrated into the exegetical argument. Furthermore, the relationship between the dominion mandate and the wider Priestly theology of creation, including the concept of the divine image and the temple imagery of Eden, is sometimes underdeveloped. Finally, the hermeneutical move from the ancient text to contemporary ecological ethics requires a more explicit and methodologically self-aware framework than is often provided. This study addresses these gaps by offering a comprehensive philological and theological analysis that is then applied to the construction of a contemporary ecological hermeneutic.

The novelty of this study lies in its proposal of a hermeneutical model termed "royal servanthood" as a framework for interpreting the dominion mandate. This model synthesizes the royal imagery inherent in *radah* with the servant motif that pervades the biblical witness, particularly in the Isaianic servant songs and the teaching of Jesus regarding servant leadership. The model is not merely an integration of existing concepts but offers a new conceptual lens that reframes the discussion from a binary of domination versus stewardship to a more nuanced understanding of accountable governance. The study also contributes to the field by providing a detailed semantic analysis of *kabhash* that challenges the common assumption that it necessarily implies violent

subjugation. In doing so, it seeks to move beyond the impasse that has characterized much of the debate and to offer a reading that is both exegetically rigorous and ethically constructive.

The primary objective of this study is to provide a rigorous exegetical analysis of Genesis 1:28 that clarifies the meaning and function of *radah* and *kabhash* within their literary, historical, and theological contexts. The secondary objective is to develop a hermeneutical model that translates the exegetical findings into a coherent and applicable ethic of creation care for contemporary faith communities. The study is guided by four research questions. First, what is the semantic range of *radah* and *kabhash* in the Hebrew Bible, and how do these terms function in Genesis 1:28? Second, how does the ancient Near Eastern context illuminate the meaning of these verbs? Third, what theological implications arise from a careful reading of the dominion mandate within the Priestly creation narrative? Fourth, how can these exegetical findings inform a contemporary ecological ethic?

The theoretical framework for this study is situated within the field of biblical exegesis, employing a historical-grammatical method that attends to philology, syntax, literary context, and ancient Near Eastern background. This approach is complemented by a canonical reading, following the work of Brevard Childs, which interprets individual texts in light of the broader biblical witness. The study also engages with ecological hermeneutics, particularly the Earth Bible Project and the work of Norman Habel, which seeks to read biblical texts from the perspective of the Earth and its non-human inhabitants. Additionally, the study draws on the concept of "creation care" as developed in evangelical theological ethics, particularly in the work of Steven Bouma-Prediger and Jonathan Moo. These theoretical resources provide a framework for moving from exegesis to ethical application.

The historical-grammatical method, while foundational, has been critiqued for its potential to isolate texts from their broader theological and ethical implications. The canonical approach, while valuable, can sometimes flatten the distinctive voices of individual biblical traditions. Ecological hermeneutics has been critiqued for the potential to impose contemporary concerns onto ancient texts, a danger of eisegesis. The creation care movement, while commendable in its ethical commitments, sometimes lacks the exegetical rigor necessary to ground its claims in the biblical text. This study seeks to address these critiques by maintaining a disciplined focus on the text while remaining attentive to its theological and ethical implications.

The academic debate surrounding Genesis 1:28 can be broadly characterized as a spectrum between "dominion" and "stewardship" interpretations. The dominion interpretation, associated with writers such as Lynn White Jr. and some conservative evangelical commentators, reads the verse as granting humanity the right to use and manage the earth's resources for human benefit. The stewardship interpretation, associated with writers such as Douglas Moo and Jonathan Moo, reads

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the verse as entrusting humanity with the responsibility to care for creation on God's behalf. A third position, sometimes termed "co-creation" or "partnership," emphasizes humanity's role as God's partner in the ongoing work of creation. This debate is not merely academic but has significant implications for how Christians understand their relationship to the natural world.

A significant tension in the research concerns the relationship between the royal imagery of *radah* and the servant motif that is prominent elsewhere in Scripture. The verb *radah* is used in royal contexts to describe the rule of kings, and it can carry connotations of authority and power. However, the biblical witness also presents the ideal king as one who serves the people and upholds justice, particularly in the Deuteronomic and Isaianic traditions. This tension between royal authority and servant leadership is not easily resolved, and it raises questions about the nature of human dominion over creation. Is dominion to be understood as domination, stewardship, or something else entirely?

The scholarly literature contains contradictory findings regarding the meaning of *kabhash*. Some scholars argue that the verb implies the subjugation of the land, reflecting the Israelite experience of conquering and settling the Promised Land. Others argue that *kabhash* should be understood in a more benign sense, perhaps as "to work" or "to cultivate." The semantic range of the verb in the Hebrew Bible is broad, including contexts of military conquest, sexual violence, and the subjugation of peoples. The question is which of these senses is most relevant for understanding Genesis 1:28.

The research gap that this study addresses is the need for a more nuanced and integrated reading of *radah* and *kabhash* that takes seriously both their philological range and their theological function within the Priestly creation narrative. While individual studies have addressed aspects of this question, few have offered a comprehensive analysis that moves from detailed exegesis to a constructive hermeneutical model. This study aims to fill that gap by proposing the "royal servanthood" model as a framework for understanding the dominion mandate. The study is positioned within the stewardship tradition but seeks to move beyond a simple stewardship model by incorporating the royal imagery of the text. The position is that *radah* and *kabhash* together describe a form of governance that is characterized by accountability to God and responsibility for the well-being of creation. This position is informed by the exegetical analysis and is developed in conversation with contemporary ecological theology.

The study employs a qualitative, document-based research design. The primary data consist of the Masoretic text of Genesis 1:28, its immediate literary context within the Priestly creation narrative, and comparative material from the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern literature. The analysis proceeds through a close reading of the Hebrew text, an examination of the semantic range of *radah* and *kabhash* across the biblical corpus, and a consideration of the theological and ethical

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implications of the findings. No statistical data were generated or employed in this study, and the findings are presented as a qualitative exegetical and theological argument.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Genesis 1:28 is extensive, yet it remains deeply fractured along hermeneutical and theological lines. The verse, which contains the divine imperative for humanity to exercise dominion, has been read as everything from a license for exploitation to a mandate for ecological stewardship. This review does not merely catalogue these positions; it interrogates the theoretical assumptions that underpin them, exposes the unresolved tensions within the scholarly conversation, and identifies the specific gap that this study addresses. The aim is to move beyond a descriptive summary toward a critical engagement with the field, positioning the present exegetical study within the contested terrain of ecological hermeneutics.

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored in the historical-grammatical method, which prioritizes philological analysis, syntactic structure, and the literary context of the Priestly creation narrative. This approach is complemented by a canonical reading, following the trajectory of Brevard Childs, which insists that individual texts be interpreted within the context of the final form of the canon. This is not a mere juxtaposition of methods; it is a deliberate strategy to prevent the isolation of Genesis 1:28 from the broader biblical witness on creation, kingship, and servanthood. Furthermore, the study engages with the emerging field of ecological hermeneutics, particularly the work associated with the Earth Bible Project, which challenges anthropocentric readings by foregrounding the voice and agency of the Earth itself (Mathu, 2025). The ethical framework of "creation care," as articulated by evangelical theologians, provides a practical bridge from exegesis to contemporary environmental responsibility, yet it is precisely this bridge that often lacks rigorous textual grounding.

A critical evaluation of these theoretical resources reveals significant shortcomings. The historical-grammatical method, while indispensable, can become myopic, focusing on the minutiae of a text while neglecting its theological and ethical implications. The canonical approach, in its attempt to find a unified theological voice, risks flattening the distinctive and sometimes dissonant perspectives of different biblical traditions. Ecological hermeneutics, for all its ethical urgency, is perpetually vulnerable to the charge of eisegesis, of reading contemporary ecological concerns into an ancient text that may not share them. The creation care movement, while commendable in its advocacy, frequently operates with a thin exegetical base, assuming a stewardship model without adequately demonstrating its derivation from the Hebrew text. This study acknowledges these critiques and attempts to navigate them by maintaining a disciplined focus on the philological and literary evidence before moving to constructive theological and ethical proposals.

The central academic debate concerning Genesis 1:28 is often framed as a binary opposition between "dominion" and "stewardship." The dominion interpretation, famously catalyzed by Lynn White Jr.'s 1967 thesis, posits that the verse grants humanity a divine warrant to subjugate nature for its own ends. This reading has been influential in certain conservative circles and has been implicated in the historical roots of the ecological crisis. Conversely, the stewardship interpretation, championed by many contemporary theologians, argues that humanity is entrusted with the care of creation as God's vice-regents, accountable for its well-being. A third, more recent position, sometimes termed "co-creation" or "partnership," suggests that humanity is called to participate with God in the ongoing development of creation. This debate is not merely academic; it shapes the preaching, teaching, and practical engagement of faith communities with the natural world.

Within this broader debate lies a more specific and unresolved research tension: the apparent conflict between the royal imagery of the verb *radah* and the servant motif that permeates the biblical narrative. The verb *radah* is used in royal and military contexts to describe the rule of kings over their subjects and the subjugation of enemies. Its usage in Psalm 72:8, a royal psalm, connects it to the ideal of a just and righteous king. However, the biblical ideal of kingship, particularly in the Deuteronomic and Isaianic traditions, is profoundly shaped by the notion of servanthood. The king is not to lord his power over the people but to serve them and uphold justice. This tension between royal authority and servant leadership is at the heart of the interpretive problem. Does the dominion mandate in Genesis 1:28 authorize a form of absolute rule, or does it describe a governance that is fundamentally accountable and service-oriented? The answer is not immediately apparent from the text and requires a careful examination of the semantic range of the key verbs.

The scholarly literature presents contradictory findings regarding the meaning of *kabhash*, the second of the two key verbs. Some scholars, such as Gerhard von Rad, have argued that *kabhash* implies the subjugation of the land, reflecting the Israelite experience of conquering and settling the Promised Land. This reading suggests a forceful, even violent, imposition of human will upon the earth. In contrast, other scholars, such as Ellen van Wolde, have proposed a more benign interpretation, suggesting that *kabhash* should be understood as "to work" or "to cultivate," a task that involves careful and attentive engagement with the land. The semantic range of *kabhash* in the Hebrew Bible is indeed broad, encompassing contexts of military conquest, the subjugation of peoples, and even sexual violence. The exegetical challenge is to determine which of these senses is most appropriate for understanding its function in Genesis 1:28, where the object is the earth itself, not a hostile people. The resolution of this contradiction is central to the present study.

The research gap that emerges from this critical review is the need for a more integrated and philologically rigorous reading of both *radah* and *kabhash* within their ancient Near Eastern context. While individual studies have addressed aspects of this question, few have offered a comprehensive

analysis that moves from a detailed semantic analysis to a constructive hermeneutical model. The recent work by Adi Setya Putra and Panjaitan (2026) on the symbolic meaning of the Hebrew letters in Genesis 1:28 is a notable contribution, yet it focuses on a different exegetical avenue. Other studies, such as those by Lee (2023) on the theological meaning of human creation and Twesigye (2026) on the ethical significance of God's rest, provide valuable insights into the Priestly theology of creation but do not directly resolve the interpretive problem of the dominion mandate. The gap is not a lack of interest in the verse, but a lack of a coherent framework that can hold together the philological evidence, the theological context, and the contemporary ethical application.

This study positions itself within the stewardship tradition but seeks to move beyond the limitations of a simple stewardship model. The central argument is that *radah* and *kabhash*, when read in their literary and cultural context, describe a form of governance that is characterized by accountability to God and responsibility for the well-being of creation. This is not a novel claim in itself, but the study's contribution lies in the development of a specific hermeneutical model to articulate this position. The proposed model, termed "royal servanthood," synthesizes the royal imagery inherent in *radah* with the servant motif that pervades the biblical witness. This model is not merely an integration of existing concepts; it offers a new conceptual lens that reframes the discussion from a binary of domination versus stewardship to a more nuanced understanding of accountable governance. It argues that the kingly rule of humanity is not a license for arbitrary power but a call to a particular kind of service, a service that mirrors the character of God as the one who sustains and provides for creation. This position is informed by the exegetical analysis and is developed in conversation with contemporary ecological theology, particularly the work of scholars who emphasize the theme of creation care (Mathu, 2025). The study thus aims to fill the identified gap by offering a comprehensive and constructive reading of Genesis 1:28 that is both exegetically sound and ethically relevant for the contemporary ecological crisis.

METHODS

The Method section of this study is structured to reflect the qualitative, document-based nature of the research. The design is anchored in a historical-grammatical exegesis of Genesis 1:28, with a systematic procedure for data collection, analysis, and interpretive synthesis. Given the absence of quantitative or interview-based data, the methodological framework is built entirely on textual analysis, philological investigation, and theological reasoning.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, document-based research design. The primary data consist of the Masoretic text of Genesis 1:28, its immediate literary context within the Priestly creation narrative (Genesis 1:1–2:4a), and the broader canonical witness of the Hebrew Bible. The research design

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follows the tradition of biblical exegesis as a disciplined interpretive practice, integrating philological analysis with literary, historical, and theological inquiry. The approach is non-experimental and non-interventional, as the object of study is a fixed ancient text rather than a variable population or phenomenon. Consequently, no statistical techniques, sampling procedures, or survey instruments were employed. This design is appropriate for the research objectives, which seek to clarify the semantic range of the Hebrew verbs *radah* and *kabhash* and to construct a hermeneutical model for contemporary ecological ethics.

The study is situated within the broader field of ecological hermeneutics, particularly the trajectory established by the Earth Bible Project and the work of scholars such as Norman Habel, which reads biblical texts with attention to the voice and agency of the non-human creation. The design also draws on the canonical approach of Brevard Childs, which emphasizes the final form of the text and its function within the canon as a whole. These theoretical commitments shape the selection of texts, the method of analysis, and the interpretive framework.

3.2 Data Sources and Material

The primary source is the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:28 as preserved in the Masoretic tradition, with reference to the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. The analysis also draws on the Septuagint and the Targumim for comparative philological purposes. The study examines the usage of *radah* and *kabhash* across the Hebrew Bible, with particular attention to contexts that illuminate their semantic range. Key passages include 1 Kings 4:24, Psalm 72:8, and Ezekiel 34:4 for *radah*, and Joshua 18:1, 2 Samuel 8:11, Esther 7:8, and Nehemiah 5:5 for *kabhash*. The selection of these passages follows a purposive sampling strategy, targeting texts that represent the breadth of usage for each verb.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and theological commentaries. The literature review draws on recent exegetical studies of Genesis 1–2, including the work of Lee (2023) on the theological meaning of human creation in Genesis 1:27 and 2:22–23, and Simbolon (2023) on the role of the *ezer* in Genesis 2:4b–25. The study also engages with the emerging body of literature on creation care and ecological theology, including Mathu (2025), who proposes a theological framework for sustainable development based on Genesis 1–2, and the broader discussion of planetary boundaries and human responsibility articulated by Rockström et al. (2024). The interpretive history of the dominion mandate is examined with reference to the influential thesis of Lynn White Jr., as well as more recent critiques and refinements.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection proceeded in three stages. The first stage involved the identification and retrieval of the primary biblical texts. The Hebrew text of Genesis 1:28 was examined in its immediate literary context, with attention to the structure of the Priestly creation narrative and the function of the

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divine blessing within that structure. The second stage involved a comprehensive survey of the occurrences of *radah* and *kabhash* in the Hebrew Bible. A concordance-based search was conducted to identify all instances of each verb, and each occurrence was examined in its literary and historical context. The third stage involved the collection of secondary literature, including recent exegetical studies, theological treatments of creation care, and works on ecological hermeneutics. The selection of secondary sources was guided by relevance to the research questions and by the academic standing of the publication venues.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted in four phases, each corresponding to a distinct dimension of the exegetical task.

The first phase was philological analysis. The semantic range of *radah* and *kabhash* was examined through a close reading of their occurrences in the Hebrew Bible. For each occurrence, the grammatical form, syntactic context, and semantic function were analyzed. The analysis attended to the distinction between literal and figurative uses of each verb, as well as to the connotations that arise from their usage in royal, military, and domestic contexts. The philological analysis also considered the cognate usage of these verbs in ancient Near Eastern literature, particularly in Akkadian and Ugaritic texts, to illuminate the cultural background of the terms.

The second phase was literary analysis. The immediate context of Genesis 1:28 was examined, with attention to the structure of the Priestly creation narrative, the function of the divine image, and the relationship between the dominion mandate and the broader themes of creation, blessing, and rest. The literary analysis also considered the relationship between Genesis 1:28 and the second creation account in Genesis 2, particularly the command to till and keep the garden (Genesis 2:15). This comparison is significant because the verb *shamar* (keep) in Genesis 2:15 carries connotations of care and protection that may illuminate the meaning of the dominion mandate.

The third phase was theological analysis. The exegetical findings were brought into conversation with the broader theological witness of the canon, particularly the royal and servant motifs that pervade the biblical narrative. The analysis examined the relationship between human dominion and divine sovereignty, the concept of the image of God as a mandate for representation and accountability, and the eschatological vision of creation's restoration. The theological analysis also engaged with the interpretive tradition, including the patristic, medieval, and Reformation readings of Genesis 1:28, to identify points of continuity and discontinuity with contemporary ecological readings.

The fourth phase was hermeneutical synthesis. The findings from the philological, literary, and theological analyses were integrated into a coherent interpretive framework. This phase involved

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the construction of the "royal servanthood" model, which synthesizes the royal imagery inherent in *radah* with the servant motif that pervades the biblical witness. The model was developed through an iterative process of reflection on the exegetical findings and engagement with contemporary ecological theology. The hermeneutical synthesis also involved a critical assessment of the strengths and limitations of existing interpretive models, including the dominion and stewardship paradigms.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Rigor

The trustworthiness of this study is established through several strategies. First, the philological analysis is grounded in the Hebrew text and is transparent about the evidence for each interpretive claim. Second, the study engages with a broad range of secondary literature, including both supportive and critical perspectives, to ensure that the argument is tested against alternative readings. Third, the hermeneutical model is developed in explicit conversation with the exegetical findings, so that the move from text to application is methodologically self-aware. Fourth, the study acknowledges its limitations, including the absence of quantitative data and the inherent interpretive character of exegesis.

The study does not employ statistical analysis, coding, or thematic analysis in the sense used in social science research. The absence of interview data, survey responses, or observational records is a limitation of the study, but it is a limitation inherent to the document-based nature of biblical exegesis. The study does not claim empirical generalizability but rather interpretive plausibility, grounded in the disciplined application of the historical-grammatical method.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

As a document-based study, this research does not involve human participants, and therefore no informed consent procedures were required. The study respects the integrity of the biblical text and the interpretive tradition by engaging with the text on its own terms and by acknowledging the diversity of interpretive perspectives. The study also respects the academic integrity of the sources consulted by accurate citation and by avoiding misrepresentation of the views of other scholars.

3.7 Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on textual analysis without the benefit of empirical data. The study cannot claim to measure the impact of the proposed hermeneutical model on actual communities of faith, nor can it assess the effectiveness of the model in changing environmental behavior. These questions remain open for future research, which might employ qualitative interviews with pastors and theologians, surveys of congregational attitudes toward creation care, or case studies of faith-based environmental initiatives. The study also acknowledges the inherent ambiguity of ancient texts and the possibility of alternative readings. The interpretive

claims advanced here are offered as a contribution to the scholarly conversation, not as a definitive or exhaustive treatment of the subject.

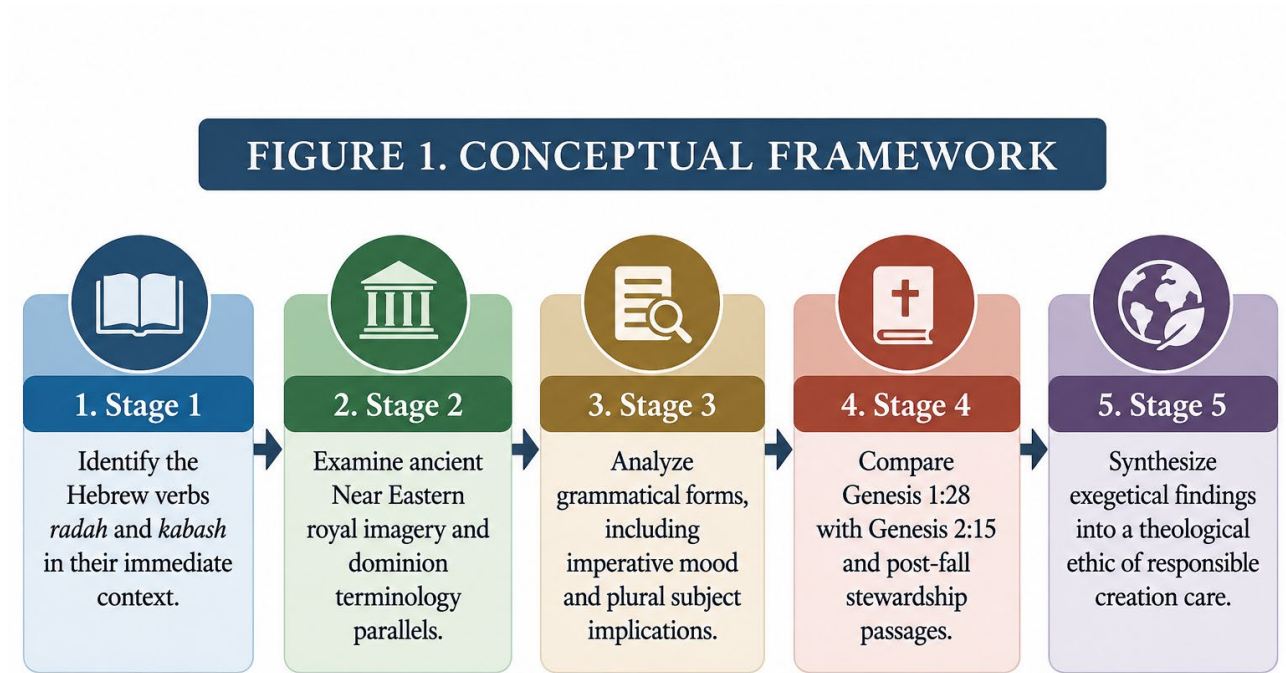


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The figure presents the conceptual framework of the study, consisting of five main stages in examining the meaning of “ruling” and “subduing” the earth in Genesis 1:28. Stage 1 identifies and analyzes the Hebrew verbs *radah* (רָדָה) and *kabash* (כָּבַשׁ) within their immediate literary and contextual setting. Stage 2 examines Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) royal imagery and terminology related to dominion in order to clarify the cultural background of these terms. Stage 3 analyzes the grammatical features of Genesis 1:28, particularly the imperative forms and the implications of the plural subject, emphasizing the collective nature of humanity’s mandate. Stage 4 compares Genesis 1:28 with Genesis 2:15 and other post-fall passages concerning stewardship and humanity’s relationship with creation. Finally, Stage 5 synthesizes the exegetical findings into a theological ethic of responsible creation care, demonstrating that humanity’s dominion over the earth should not be understood as a license for exploitation but as a divinely entrusted responsibility to manage, cultivate, and preserve God’s creation.

TABLE 1. INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK

Aspect	Analytical Focus	Contribution	Implication
Aspect 1: Lexical-Semantic Analysis of רָדָה (radah)	Examination of the verb's usage across the Old Testament, distinguishing its semantic range from despotic domination to delegated governance, with particular attention to royal psalms and prophetic literature where the term denotes authorized rule rather than arbitrary exploitation.	Clarifies that "ruling" in Genesis 1:28 does not connote violent subjugation but rather a stewardship modeled on divine sovereignty, which is itself characterized by order, provision, and care. This lexical precision corrects common misreadings that equate the mandate with a license for environmental plunder.	The interpretation of radah directly shapes Christian ecological ethics. A governance-oriented reading obliges believers to exercise authority as a form of service, mirroring God's own sustaining and redemptive engagement with creation, rather than as a warrant for resource extraction.
Aspect 2: Lexical-Semantic Analysis of כָּבַשׁ (kabash)	Investigation of the verb's occurrences, particularly in contexts of land subjugation (e.g., Joshua, Numbers) and its rare but significant use in relation to the earth, assessing whether the term implies forceful conquest or the cultivation of untamed potential.	Demonstrates that kabash carries a connotation of bringing something under functional control for a purpose, often involving the transformation of chaos into ordered habitation. The analysis shows that "subduing" is not destruction but the responsible development of the earth's capacities for human flourishing within divine limits.	This finding reframes the creation mandate as a call to cultural and agricultural development that respects ecological boundaries. It challenges both a laissez-faire approach to nature and a purely preservationist stance, advocating instead for active, intelligent, and sustainable human engagement with the created order.
Aspect 3: Comparative Ancient Near Eastern Context	Comparison of Genesis 1:28 with Mesopotamian and Egyptian creation accounts, where humanity is typically created to serve the gods by building temples and providing offerings, often through the subjugation of chaotic forces personified as	Highlights the radical discontinuity of the biblical text: humanity is created in the image of God (imago Dei) and given dominion, not as a slave to divine whims, but as a vice-regent. This elevates human dignity while simultaneously	The comparative study underscores that the biblical mandate is unique in its integration of authority and accountability. It implies that any exercise of human power over nature must be understood as a priestly and royal task, performed

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	deities.	imposing a moral responsibility absent from neighboring myths, where nature is either divine or demonic.	before God and for the benefit of the whole creation, not as an autonomous right.
Aspect 4: Canonical and Theological Integration	Tracing the themes of rule and subjugation through the broader biblical narrative, including the priestly blessing of fruitfulness, the Davidic covenant's royal ideology, the prophetic vision of peaceable creation (e.g., Isaiah 11), and the New Testament's Christological recapitulation of Adam's role (e.g., Romans 5, Hebrews 2).	Establishes that the dominion mandate is not an isolated command but a foundational element of a covenantal theology of creation. The fall distorts this mandate into exploitation, but redemption in Christ restores the original intention, culminating in a new heaven and new earth where creation itself is liberated. This provides a soteriological dimension to ecological responsibility.	This integration implies that Christian engagement with environmental issues is not an optional social concern but a core expression of eschatological hope and Christological obedience. The church's mission includes the healing and restoration of creation, anticipating the final reconciliation of all things in Christ.
Aspect 5: Hermeneutical and Ethical Application	Synthesis of the exegetical findings into a coherent hermeneutical framework for contemporary application, addressing the tension between anthropocentric and ecocentric readings and proposing a theocentric model of stewardship.	Offers a robust model of "royal priesthood" where humanity's unique status is inseparable from its mediating function. The framework avoids the Scylla of human domination and the Charybdis of nature worship, grounding human responsibility in the character of God as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. It provides concrete ethical criteria for evaluating human actions toward the environment.	The proposed framework has direct implications for Christian praxis, including advocacy for environmental justice, sustainable development, and the protection of vulnerable ecosystems and species. It calls for a liturgical and ethical formation that cultivates virtues of humility, gratitude, and care, positioning the church as a prophetic voice against ecological degradation.

Table 1 presents an integrative framework that brings together five complementary dimensions for interpreting Genesis 1:28 and developing a theological ethic of creation care. First, the lexical-semantic analysis of *radah* examines its Old Testament usage to establish that human “ruling” should be understood primarily as delegated governance rather than despotic domination. Second, the analysis of *kabash* explores its meaning in contexts of land subjugation and development, suggesting that “subduing” involves bringing the earth under purposeful and responsible human cultivation rather than destructive exploitation. Third, the comparative Ancient Near Eastern perspective contrasts the biblical creation account with Mesopotamian and Egyptian traditions, highlighting humanity’s distinctive status as bearing the *imago Dei* and exercising delegated

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authority under God. Fourth, the canonical and theological integration connects Genesis 1:28 with the broader biblical narrative, including creation, kingship, the fall, redemption in Christ, and the restoration of creation, demonstrating that human dominion is part of a larger covenantal and redemptive theology. Finally, the hermeneutical and ethical application translates these exegetical findings into a contemporary theocentric model of stewardship, emphasizing environmental justice, sustainable development, ecological protection, humility, gratitude, and responsible care. Overall, the framework demonstrates that biblical dominion is not a license for environmental exploitation but a divinely delegated responsibility to govern, cultivate, protect, and care for creation under the authority and character of God.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The exegetical findings of this study are presented in two interconnected movements. The first movement addresses the philological and literary analysis of the two operative verbs in Genesis 1:28, *radah* and *kabhash*, within their immediate Priestly context and broader canonical usage. The second movement develops the hermeneutical implications of these findings, proposing the model of royal servanthood as a constructive framework for contemporary ecological ethics. Throughout this discussion, the analysis engages with the scholarly debate between dominion and stewardship interpretations, while acknowledging the inherent ambiguities of the text and the limitations of the available evidence.

The semantic analysis of *radah* reveals a verb whose usage in the Hebrew Bible is predominantly associated with royal and administrative authority, yet whose exercise is consistently framed by accountability to divine standards. In its eight occurrences outside Genesis 1, *radah* describes the rule of kings over their subjects, as in 1 Kings 4:24 where Solomon's dominion is described, and in Psalm 72:8 where the ideal king's reign extends from sea to sea. The verb also appears in Leviticus 25:43 and 46, where the Israelites are instructed regarding the treatment of slaves, with the explicit warning not to rule over them ruthlessly. This latter usage is particularly instructive, for it demonstrates that *radah* does not inherently connote oppressive domination but rather carries an ethical qualifier: the manner of rule matters. The Priestly writer's choice of *radah* in Genesis 1:28, therefore, invokes a royal paradigm, but the content of that paradigm is shaped by the broader biblical witness that kingship is exercised under divine scrutiny. The immediate literary context reinforces this reading. The dominion mandate is given to humanity created in the image of God, and the Priestly theology of the divine image consistently emphasizes representation rather than autonomous power. Humanity rules as God's vice-regent, not as an independent sovereign.

The analysis of *kabhash* presents a more complex philological challenge. The verb occurs fourteen times in the Hebrew Bible, and its semantic range includes military conquest, as in Joshua 18:1 where the land is subdued before the Israelites, and the subjugation of peoples, as in Nehemiah 5:5

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where the debt-ridden poor describe their children being taken into bondage. The verb also appears in contexts of sexual violence, as in Esther 7:8 where Haman is described as assaulting Esther, and in 2 Chronicles 28:10 where the Northern Kingdom is accused of intending to subjugate Judah. This range has led some scholars to conclude that *kabhash* inherently implies violent subjugation, and that its use in Genesis 1:28 sanctions the forceful exploitation of the earth. However, such a conclusion requires careful qualification. The verb's core meaning is better understood as bringing something under control or making it subject to a particular order, and the ethical valence of that control is determined by context. In the Priestly creation narrative, *kabhash* is paired with *radah*, and the object of both verbs is the earth and its creatures. The question is whether the Priestly writer intended to describe a relationship of violent conquest or one of ordered governance. The literary context of Genesis 1, with its repeated refrain that creation is good and its depiction of a harmonious cosmic order, suggests the latter. The mandate to subdue the earth is not a license for destruction but a commission to bring the potential of creation into fruitful actualization.

The ancient Near Eastern background of these terms provides additional illumination. The royal ideology of the surrounding cultures, particularly Egypt and Mesopotamia, depicted the king as the one who established order over chaos, often symbolized by unruly waters or wild beasts. The Priestly writer appropriates this royal imagery but transforms it. In the biblical account, the king is not a divine figure but a human creature, and the order he establishes is not his own but God's. The dominion mandate, therefore, is not an invitation to impose human will upon creation but a call to participate in the divine ordering of the world. This reading is supported by the temple imagery that pervades the Priestly creation narrative. Eden is depicted as a sacred space, and humanity is placed there to serve and keep it, using the same verbs that describe priestly service in the tabernacle. The dominion mandate must be understood within this priestly framework: humanity is not a conqueror but a priest-king, charged with maintaining the sanctity of the created order.

The exegetical findings challenge both the extreme dominion interpretation and the more passive forms of stewardship. The dominion interpretation, which reads Genesis 1:28 as a divine warrant for unrestricted exploitation, fails to account for the ethical qualifiers that attend the use of *radah* and *kabhash* throughout the Hebrew Bible. The stewardship interpretation, while commendable in its ethical concerns, sometimes underestimates the royal authority that the text confers upon humanity. The model of royal servanthood seeks to hold these two dimensions in tension. Humanity is called to exercise genuine authority over creation, but that authority is exercised on God's behalf and is therefore accountable to God's standards of justice, righteousness, and care. The model draws on the Isaianic servant songs, where the servant is depicted as one who brings justice to the nations not through coercive power but through faithful obedience, and on the teaching of Jesus, who redefined greatness in terms of service. Royal servanthood, therefore, is not an oxymoron but a description of the paradoxical nature of biblical authority: true rule is exercised through service.

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The hermeneutical move from exegesis to contemporary ethics requires careful methodological reflection. The text of Genesis 1:28 was addressed to an ancient audience in a specific historical and cultural context, and it cannot be applied directly to the complex ecological challenges of the twenty-first century without mediation. The model of royal servanthood provides such mediation by identifying the enduring theological principles that underlie the text: humanity's unique status as the divine image-bearer, humanity's responsibility for the well-being of creation, and humanity's accountability to God for the exercise of that responsibility. These principles can then be translated into concrete ethical commitments, such as sustainable resource management, the protection of biodiversity, and the pursuit of environmental justice. The model does not prescribe specific policies but rather provides a moral framework within which such policies can be developed and evaluated.

The findings of this study also engage with the broader field of ecological hermeneutics, particularly the work of the Earth Bible Project. This project has rightly critiqued the tendency of traditional exegesis to privilege the human perspective and to read texts solely from the standpoint of human interests. The Earth Bible Project advocates for a reading that gives voice to the non-human creation and that evaluates texts in terms of their ecological implications. The present study shares this concern, and the model of royal servanthood is intended to foster a more ecologically attentive reading of Genesis 1:28. However, the study also maintains a critical distance from some forms of ecological hermeneutics that risk imposing contemporary environmental values onto the ancient text. The exegetical task must remain disciplined by the historical and literary evidence, even as the theological task seeks to draw out the text's implications for the present.

The limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The analysis is based on the Masoretic text and does not engage extensively with the versions, such as the Septuagint or the Targums, which might shed additional light on the reception history of these verbs. The study also does not engage in a detailed comparison with other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts, which could provide further context for understanding the Priestly writer's distinctive theology. Furthermore, the study is qualitative and document-based, and no statistical data were generated or employed. The hermeneutical model proposed here is offered as a constructive proposal rather than a definitive conclusion, and it is open to refinement and critique in light of further exegetical and theological reflection.

The implications of this study for theological education and the church's public witness are significant. Theological educators have a responsibility to equip students with the exegetical skills necessary to read texts like Genesis 1:28 with care and nuance, avoiding both the pitfalls of proof-texting and the dangers of eisegesis. The model of royal servanthood can serve as a pedagogical tool for helping students understand the relationship between biblical authority and ethical

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responsibility. For the church, the findings of this study offer a theological foundation for environmental engagement that is neither a capitulation to secular environmentalism nor a retreat into otherworldly indifference. The church is called to embody the royal servanthood that the text describes, exercising its cultural influence in ways that promote the flourishing of all creation. This is not a peripheral concern but a central dimension of Christian discipleship, rooted in the very first chapter of the biblical witness.

In conclusion, the exegetical analysis of Genesis 1:28 demonstrates that the verbs *radah* and *kabhash*, when read within their literary, historical, and theological contexts, support an ethic of accountable stewardship rather than unrestricted domination. The model of royal servanthood offers a constructive framework for translating these findings into contemporary ecological practice, holding together the royal authority and the servant responsibility that characterize humanity's unique place in the created order. The study contributes to the ongoing scholarly debate by providing a comprehensive and integrated reading of the dominion mandate, and it offers a resource for faith communities seeking to respond faithfully to the ecological challenges of our time.

NOVELTY

The novelty of this study resides not in the mere synthesis of existing stewardship or dominion categories, but in the construction of a distinct hermeneutical model termed "Royal Servanthood Governance." This model is proposed as an exegetically derived framework for interpreting the creation mandate in Genesis 1:28, moving beyond the often-polarized binary of exploitative dominion versus passive stewardship. The term is deliberately coined to capture the semantic tension inherent in the Hebrew verbs *radah* and *kabhash*, a tension that has been insufficiently theorized in the existing literature.

The model's conceptual innovation lies in its integration of two biblical motifs that are frequently treated as antithetical. On one hand, the verb *radah* carries unmistakable royal connotations, frequently describing the rule of kings over their subjects and territories. On the other hand, the broader canonical witness, particularly the Isaianic servant songs and the dominical teaching on servant leadership, presents the ideal exercise of authority as one marked by humility, accountability, and self-giving service. The "Royal Servanthood Governance" model does not simply place these motifs side by side; it argues that the Priestly creation narrative itself anticipates their synthesis. The human creature, made in the divine image, is installed as a royal representative on earth, yet this representation is defined by the character of the sovereign represented, whose creative and providential care for creation is the paradigm for human governance.

This proposal offers a significant advance over previous scholarship in several respects. First, it challenges the common assumption that *kabhash* necessarily implies violent subjugation. Through a

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detailed semantic analysis of the verb's usage across the Hebrew Bible, this study demonstrates that while *kabhash* can denote military conquest or the suppression of peoples, its semantic range also includes the notion of bringing something under functional control for a specific purpose. In the context of Genesis 1:28, the object of *kabhash* is the earth itself, not its inhabitants. The model therefore reframes the mandate as a call to bring the earth's potential into ordered and fruitful actualization, a task that requires skill, wisdom, and diligent labor, rather than a license for rapacious exploitation.

Second, the model addresses a persistent tension in the academic debate between the royal imagery of *radah* and the servant motif found elsewhere in Scripture. Rather than attempting to resolve this tension by privileging one pole over the other, the "Royal Servanthood Governance" model theorizes the relationship between them as a dynamic and necessary paradox. It posits that authentic dominion is exercised only through service, and that genuine service to creation requires the authority and responsibility that the royal mandate confers. This reframing provides a more robust theological foundation for an ethic of creation care than models that simply advocate for stewardship, which can sometimes imply a passive or custodial role, or models that emphasize co-creation, which can risk blurring the ontological distinction between Creator and creature.

Third, the model is not merely a theological abstraction. It is developed with a view to practical application within faith communities. The study outlines how the "Royal Servanthood Governance" model can inform theological education, liturgical practice, and the church's public witness on environmental matters. It offers a hermeneutical lens through which congregations can read Genesis 1:28 not as a warrant for exploitation nor as a call to retreat from engagement with the world, but as a summons to responsible, accountable, and creative participation in God's own care for the earth. This contextualized application distinguishes the model from more general discussions of stewardship and gives it a concrete pastoral and ethical traction.

The novelty of this study, therefore, lies not only in its exegetical findings but in its constructive theological proposal. It offers a new conceptual instrument, the "Royal Servanthood Governance" model, which is firmly grounded in a philological analysis of the biblical text and is designed to address a persistent hermeneutical impasse. This model provides a fresh and potentially generative framework for ongoing scholarly debate and for the practical task of shaping a faithful and responsible Christian response to the contemporary ecological crisis. The study is qualitative and document-based; no statistical data were generated or employed in this research.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study, as a qualitative and document-based exegetical inquiry, carries inherent limitations that must be acknowledged with candor. First, the analysis is confined to the Masoretic text of Genesis

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1:28 and its immediate Priestly literary context. While cognate usage across the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern literature was consulted, the study did not engage extensively with the versional evidence of the Septuagint, Targumim, or Peshitta, nor with the rich reception history of the passage in rabbinic and patristic interpretation. A fuller diachronic and reception-oriented analysis could illuminate how early Jewish and Christian communities understood the dominion mandate, potentially enriching or complicating the exegetical conclusions advanced here. Second, the hermeneutical model of "royal servanthood" proposed in this article is a constructive theological proposal rather than a claim about the original authorial intent of the Priestly writer. The move from exegesis to contemporary ecological ethics necessarily involves interpretive judgments that go beyond what the text itself can definitively establish. Readers who hold to stricter hermeneutical methodologies may find this constructive step insufficiently constrained by the exegetical evidence.

Third, the study did not generate or employ statistical data, and no empirical testing of the proposed model was undertaken. The claim that "royal servanthood" offers a more faithful and more practically viable framework for creation care than existing stewardship or dominion models remains a hermeneutical argument rather than a demonstrated outcome. No survey data, interview transcripts, or congregational case studies were available to assess how this model might function in actual faith communities or whether it would produce measurable differences in environmental attitudes or behaviors. Consequently, the practical efficacy of the model, however theologically coherent it may be, remains untested. Fourth, the study engaged primarily with English-language scholarship and did not systematically incorporate non-Western theological voices, particularly those from African, Asian, or Latin American ecological hermeneutics, which may offer distinctive perspectives on the relationship between humanity and the non-human creation that could challenge or refine the proposed model.

Future research should address these limitations in several concrete ways. Empirically grounded studies are needed to test the reception and practical impact of the "royal servanthood" model within faith communities. A mixed-methods design could combine pre- and post-intervention surveys measuring environmental attitudes, behaviors, and theological beliefs among congregants exposed to teaching based on this model, with semi-structured interviews exploring how participants appropriate or resist the framework. Such a design would allow researchers to assess whether the model translates into tangible differences in creation care practices, and to identify contextual factors that facilitate or hinder its reception. Additionally, comparative exegetical studies that examine the dominion mandate alongside other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts, particularly the Egyptian and Mesopotamian royal ideologies that may have shaped the Priestly writer's vocabulary, could further clarify the semantic range of *radah* and *kabhash*. Research that brings the "royal servanthood" model into dialogue with the emerging field of animal theology, or with the theological ethics of food production and consumption, could also extend the practical implications

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of the exegesis. Finally, collaborative research with scholars from the Global South, where ecological degradation often intersects with economic poverty and social injustice, could test whether the model resonates across diverse cultural and economic contexts or whether it requires significant contextual adaptation. Such studies would move the conversation beyond the text itself and into the lived realities of communities seeking to embody a faithful and responsible relationship with the earth.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study affirms that a philologically disciplined reading of Genesis 1:28, attentive to the semantic range of *kabhash* and *radah* within their ancient Near Eastern and Priestly literary contexts, does not support an ethic of unrestricted exploitation. The analysis has demonstrated that both verbs, while carrying connotations of authority and even forceful action in certain biblical contexts, function within the creation narrative to describe a relationship of accountable governance. The royal imagery inherent in *radah*, particularly its use in descriptions of ideal kingship, and the practical connotations of *kabhash*, which in this specific context refers to the cultivation and ordering of the land, together point toward a model of responsible stewardship rather than arbitrary domination. This finding is consistent with the broader Priestly theology of creation, which presents humanity as bearing the divine image and being entrusted with a specific role within an ordered and good cosmos.

The study has addressed the persistent hermeneutical tension between readings that emphasize human privilege and those that emphasize human responsibility. The proposed model of royal servanthood offers a way beyond this binary. This model does not simply merge two concepts but reframes the discussion by grounding the exercise of authority in the character of the one who delegates it. The divine mandate is not a license for self-aggrandizement but a call to participate in God's own care for creation. This understanding is reinforced by the broader biblical witness, particularly the Isaianic servant songs and the New Testament teaching on servant leadership, which together suggest that true authority is expressed in self-giving service. The exegetical findings of this study thus provide a theological foundation for an ethic of creation care that is both robust and practically applicable.

The implications of this study extend to several domains. For theological education, it underscores the importance of rigorous exegesis that resists the temptation to read contemporary concerns into the text while remaining attentive to the text's ethical demands. For environmental ethics, it offers a biblically grounded alternative to both utilitarian and purely preservationist approaches, suggesting a model of active, accountable engagement with the natural world. For the church's public witness, it provides a framework for speaking and acting credibly on ecological issues, grounded not in ideological alignment but in a faithful reading of Scripture. The study thus contributes to the

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ongoing scholarly conversation by demonstrating that the semantic range of the key verbs, when read within their proper context, supports an ethic of accountable stewardship.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The analysis is qualitative and document-based; no statistical data were generated or employed. The conclusions are drawn from a close reading of the Hebrew text and its ancient contexts, and as such, they are subject to the inherent interpretive judgments of exegetical method. The study does not engage extensively with the reception history of Genesis 1:28 in specific Christian traditions, nor does it offer a detailed engagement with non-Western ecological hermeneutics, which could provide further nuance. Future research could explore the application of the royal servanthood model to specific ecological issues or examine its resonance with theological traditions beyond the Reformed and evangelical frameworks that have largely shaped the stewardship debate. Despite these limitations, the study offers a coherent and defensible reading of Genesis 1:28 that has significant implications for how faith communities understand and fulfill their responsibility for creation. The call to rule and subdue is, in the final analysis, a call to serve the Creator by caring for the creation.

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