

Creation Care in Genesis 1-2: A Theological Framework for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The creation narrative in Genesis 1-2 provides a key theological framework for contemporary sustainable development. The purpose of this study was to explore the theological principles embedded in Genesis 1-2 and their relevance to contemporary sustainable development. The research focused on demonstrating how the biblical themes of stewardship and dominion inform ecological conservation and sustainable resource management, examining their relevance to contemporary environmental ethics, and proposing practical applications for sustainable development. Using a desk review methodology, the study analyzed existing theological and biblical literature to develop a framework for sustainable development rooted in the theology of creation care. Key theological concepts, such as imago Dei, stewardship, and dominion, were evaluated to show how they provide a moral and ethical basis for environmental conservation. The findings revealed that the narrative of dominion in Genesis 1:28, often misinterpreted as a mandate for exploitation, should be understood as a call for responsible stewardship of the earth. The study revealed that humanity's role as caretakers, outlined in Genesis 2:15, calls for a balance between cultivating and preserving the environment, which is linked to modern sustainability principles. The study also established the interconnectedness of creation as a guiding principle for ecological harmony, drawing attention to the importance of biodiversity and equitable resource distribution. Given the findings, the study concludes that the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2 presents a theological foundation for sustainable development, encouraging faith-based communities to actively engage in environmental conservation. It noted that while the theological interpretation supports sustainable development, practical applications remain limited in theological discourse. The study thus recommends the adoption of creation care principles by religious communities and policymakers to create environmentally responsible behavior. Additionally, future research should explore empirical applications of theological frameworks in environmental conservation and investigate how other religious traditions can contribute to global sustainability efforts.

Key Words: *Creation Care, Genesis, Theological Framework, Sustainable Development, Environmental Ethics*

1.0 Introduction

Creation care, as depicted in Genesis 1-2 forms a foundational theological framework explaining humanity's responsibility towards sustainable development. The biblical narrative portrays God as the Creator of the universe, who entrusts humans with the stewardship of the earth (Rugyendo, 2022:37-46). In Genesis 1:26-28, humanity is given dominion over creation, not for exploitation, but for responsible management, reflecting the divine mandate to care for and preserve the environment.

Genesis 2:8 describes the Garden of Eden as a well-watered paradise where God places man to work and care for it. The Hebrew words (עָבַד, abad) "to work" or "to serve" and (שָׁמַר, Shamar) "take care of" or "guard" suggest active and nurturing roles; a sense of labor that can be productive and a protective role, emphasizing stewardship. The Garden is depicted as both a place of provision and a site of human responsibility, implying that stewardship involves productive and protective tasks, reinforcing sustainable interaction with creation (von Rad, 2002:60-75)

This responsibility is further elaborated in Genesis 2:15, where Adam is placed in the Garden of Eden to "work it and take care of it," emphasizing the human role as caretakers of God's creation. This perspective encourages a balanced view of development, where human progress must not come at the expense of environmental degradation (Nel, 2021:40-55).

Walton (2001) notes that Genesis 2:15 highlights the human role as stewards or caretakers of creation; to work and take care of it. This stewardship involves a responsibility to maintain and cultivate the environment, reflecting a partnership with God in sustaining creation. This stewardship theme implies that humanity is entrusted with the care of creation, suggesting that the environment is not merely a resource but a responsibility to be managed wisely and ethically.

The theological framework drawn from Genesis indicates that sustainable development is deeply rooted in the biblical concept of stewardship (Penna-Firme, 2023). Stewardship, in this context, means that humans are accountable to God for how they manage and use the earth's resources. The idea of "dominion" in Genesis 1:28 has often been misinterpreted as permission to exploit nature, but a closer reading links it with care, preservation, and sustainability. This biblical

foundation supports the idea that human development and environmental sustainability should coexist harmoniously, challenging the current global trends of environmental exploitation in the name of economic progress (Peprah, 2022). Creation care, thus, calls for a reevaluation of how humans interact with the environment, promoting sustainable practices that align with theological principles.

Given global environmental crises, such as climate change, deforestation, pollution, and loss of biodiversity, the Genesis 1-2 narrative presents a theological call for sustainable development. This theological foundation encourages Christians and faith communities to actively engage in environmental conservation, advocating for policies and practices that reflect the biblical mandate of stewardship (Andrianos & Tomren, 2021; Puglisi & Buitendag, 2022).

This study therefore sought to root sustainable development in the creation care ethos of Genesis 1-2 to provide a theological framework that not only guides individual behavior but also informs broader societal and policy-level decisions aimed at protecting and preserving the earth for future generations.

Serious debate has emerged over the concept of creation care in Genesis 1-2 in recent times, especially on matters relating to the interpretation of "dominion" in Genesis 1:28. Some scholars argue that the term has historically been misinterpreted to justify exploitation and unchecked use of natural resources, leading to environmental degradation (Kanu, 2022; Etieyibo, 2022). This interpretation brought about industrial and colonial growth, where nature was considered a resource to be subdued and exploited for human gain (Sayson et al., 2024).

On the other hand, modern theological narratives lay more emphasis on stewardship rather than domination, viewing humanity's role as caretakers of creation (Ibe & Anthony, 2023). These conflicting interpretations have brought about serious confusion on how faith communities perceive their responsibility toward the environment, with some prioritizing human development over environmental sustainability, while others advocate for a balance that respects both human progress and ecological conservation.

Furthermore, the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2 acts as a strong theological foundation for sustainable development. These texts describe the world as a harmonious and well-ordered ecosystem, with humanity appointed as its caretaker or steward (Hiebert, 2008).

The concept of *imago Dei*, or humanity created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28), explains the responsibility of humans to reflect God's care and justice in their interaction with the environment (White, 1967). Despite the potential of these scriptures to inform ecological stewardship, there is a dearth of theological engagement with Genesis in discussions on sustainability.

The best evidence supporting the study of creation care as a theological framework for sustainable development is rooted in a holistic reading of Genesis 1-2 and subsequent biblical texts that explain more about stewardship. Genesis 2:15, for instance, directly states that Adam was placed in the Garden to "work it and take care of it," clearly reflecting a responsibility to maintain and nurture the earth (Peprah, 2022).

This stewardship model is evident throughout the Bible, where themes of accountability, care for creation, and justice are evident, specifically on the laws regarding land use in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These scriptures, in addition to the growing awareness of environmental degradation and the impact of human activity on the planet, provide a strong justification for reexamining the theological implications of creation care.

This study, therefore, sought to reconcile faith with sustainability, presenting a framework that links theological principles with modern sustainable development practices. Considering the debates regarding the interpretation of "dominion" and "stewardship" in Genesis 1-2, the question was; how does the theological framework of creation care in Genesis 1-2 inform sustainable development practices? This question was meant to explore the relationship between biblical principles and contemporary sustainability efforts, especially those focusing on how Christian theology can inform environmental conservation and responsible resource management.

The study sought to clarify the theological basis for sustainable development, addressing the controversies of dominion versus stewardship, and proposed a model that reflects humanity's

God-given responsibility to care for creation. To answer this question, the study analyzed both theological interpretations and practical implications of creation care as presented in Genesis 1-2. This was to develop a theological framework that supports sustainable development through analysis of biblical texts and drawing on existing theological and environmental studies.

2.0 Literature Review

The theological framework of creation care in Genesis 1-2 has been widely discussed in the literature, especially in the context of environmental stewardship and sustainable development. Jakobsen (2024); and Dawson (2023) have explored the biblical mandate for humans to care for the earth, emphasizing the role of stewardship as an integral part of Christian ethics. Cui (2023); and Santmire (1985) argue that the term "dominion" in Genesis 1:28 has been misinterpreted as a license for exploitation, leading to environmental degradation.

Wilkinson (1991); and Levy (2024) support this idea, suggesting that a more faithful reading of the biblical text reveals a call for careful management of resources, consistent with the modern understanding of sustainability. These and many other scholars contribute to the ongoing debate about how Scripture can inform environmentally responsible behavior, providing analysis that challenges exploitative practices in favor of a more balanced approach to development.

The concept of the goodness of creation is foundational in Genesis 1, where God repeatedly declares His creation "good" and ultimately "very good" (Genesis 1:31). This affirmation of creation's intrinsic value lays the groundwork for a theology of environmental stewardship. Ancient Near Eastern cosmologies influenced the interpretation of Genesis 1, emphasizing that the goodness of creation aligns with the ancient understanding of the divine purpose in shaping a well-ordered world, Walton (2009). Beisner (2007) argues that the goodness of creation implies an ethical responsibility for environmental care, linking biblical creation narratives with contemporary ecological concerns.

African theological perspectives interpret the goodness of creation and its implications for environmental ethics, emphasizing the cultural and spiritual dimensions of Creation's value, (Nwachuku, 2020). Therefore, the theological framework derived from Genesis has several practical applications for sustainable development emphasizing the intrinsic goodness of creation

(Genesis 1) calls for active and ethical environmental stewardship. This involves implementing sustainable practices that recognize and protect the value of the natural world, aligning with Beisner's (2007) call for an ethical imperative in environmental care. Practical applications include policies that promote conservation, responsible resource management, and efforts to reduce ecological footprints.

Further, this study is anchored on eco-theology, an area that seeks to integrate ecological concerns with religious teachings. According to McFague (2009), eco-theology emphasizes that humanity's relationship with the earth is not one of dominance but one of mutual care and respect. The Earth Bible Project, led by Norman Habel (2000) also supports this interpretation, arguing that the Bible considers creation sacred, with humans tasked with preserving it. This theological perspective is in most cases associated with sustainable development goals, where the focus is on meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The literature therefore supports the idea that sustainable development can be framed within a creation care model where human progress and environmental preservation coexist harmoniously through the application of eco-theological principles to Genesis 1-2.

This study was anchored on stewardship theory as developed by Donaldson and Davis (1991). Stewardship theory states that individuals are responsible for managing resources on behalf of a higher authority, in this case, God. The stewardship theory, commonly applied in organizational and environmental contexts, supports the research objective of linking theological teachings with sustainable development practices. The theory has the idea that human well-being is directly tied to the health of the environment, and as stewards, humans are called to act not out of self-interest but for the greater good, which includes ecological sustainability (Davis et al., 1997). Stewardship theory was considered relevant to this study because it helps in bridging theological ideas with practical environmental policies, advocating for a model of development that does not exploit resources but rather nurtures and maintains them for long-term use (Habel & Wurst, 2000).

These theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for understanding how the biblical principles in Genesis 1-2 inform sustainable development practices, guiding the study's focus on the theological underpinnings of environmental stewardship.

Lee (2023) while exploring the role of Christian theology in addressing environmental degradation emphasized the church's historical misinterpretation of Genesis 1:28, which contributed to the exploitation of natural resources. The study discussed the need for a Yinist theology to counterbalance the male-dominant Yang agenda in Christian teachings. Furthermore, the researcher analyzed the incorporation of the spirit of God within the Taoist concept of *ch'i*, advocating for a more inclusive eco-theology.

Elsewhere, Stigall (2023) analyzed the concept of humanity's responsibility toward creation from the perspective of divine therapeutic trust, arguing that God entrusts humanity with the care of creation as a means of inspiring faithfulness in this vocation. The study developed a theological framework based on a reading of Genesis, explaining how divine trust encourages human trustworthiness in environmental stewardship. This trust framework could be applied to current issues of sustainability and climate change.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted a desk review research design that was chosen due to the nature of the research, which primarily involved analyzing existing theological, biblical, and academic literature. The design allowed for an in-depth analysis of secondary sources, including theological texts, environmental studies, and biblical commentaries related to Genesis 1-2 and sustainable development. This design provided the flexibility to collect relevant information from a broad range of scholarly interpretations of creation care, thus facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the topic without the need for primary data collection.

The study population comprised published academic journals, theological commentaries, and religious texts focusing on the themes of creation, stewardship, and sustainability. No sampling was required; instead, relevant literature was selected based on their relevance to the research topic and question. A purposive sampling approach was applied in selecting key publications

from theologians, environmental ethicists, and scholars in eco-theology to ensure that the analysis reflected diverse perspectives on the relationship between Genesis and creation care.

The study relied entirely on qualitative data obtained from these selected secondary sources. The main data collection instrument was content analysis, where theological arguments, biblical interpretations, and environmental principles were systematically reviewed and categorized. Descriptive analysis was employed to summarize the major themes. The analysis involved interpreting the theological implications of the findings and drawing conclusions about the relevance of creation care for sustainable development. No statistical tools were required due to the qualitative nature of the research, though thematic coding was used to organize the data into coherent categories.

The study observed all the necessary ethical considerations throughout the study. Since no human subjects were involved, informed consent was not necessary, but the study upheld the ethical standards by ensuring proper citation and acknowledgment of all sources used. The integrity of the research was guaranteed by ensuring that the selected literature was from credible and authoritative sources. Additionally, the research process was transparent, with a clear methodology for selecting, analyzing, and presenting the reviewed literature.

4.0 Results and Discussion

This study mainly focused on the interpretation of biblical texts and their relevance to modern sustainability practices. The findings revealed that the concepts of stewardship and dominion in Genesis 1-2 were central to understanding humanity's responsibility toward environmental care. The desk review of theological sources revealed that the term "dominion" has been widely misinterpreted in some historical contexts as a license for exploitation, whereas a closer reading associates it more with the stewardship model of care and preservation.

This interpretation supported the idea that sustainable development is a theological mandate. This was consistent with the assertions by previous scholars like Santmire (1985) and Wilkinson (1991) who showed the change in interpretation from exploitation to stewardship. Additionally, studies by Lee (2023) and Stigall (2023) further support this change, emphasizing the need for the church to embrace eco-theology to combat environmental degradation.

This study provides an analysis of various theological perspectives, presenting a balanced view of how Genesis 1-2 can be applied to environmental issues. However, a limitation was the reliance solely on secondary sources, which restricted the scope of practical conclusions for implementation. Unlike empirical studies that gather data from diverse stakeholders involved in sustainability efforts, this study was limited to textual analysis, which may not fully capture contemporary applications in real-world scenarios. Additionally, the study did not account for diverse cultural interpretations of biblical texts, which could influence how creation care is practiced in different global contexts.

This study found that some theological interpretations, mostly from eco-feminist perspectives, introduced the concept of balancing masculine and feminine principles (Yang and Yin) in creation care, as suggested by Lee (2023). This perspective diverged from traditional stewardship models by advocating for a more inclusive approach to sustainability, integrating gender balance in theological frameworks. While not the primary focus of this study, the emergence of such perspectives adds difficulty to the traditional understanding of stewardship and suggests future studies needed to explore how gender dynamics influence creation care practices.

The theological models examined in the study, particularly stewardship theory, proved consistent with the hypothesis that a responsible reading of Genesis 1-2 supports sustainable development. The theory models provided a framework that integrates moral, ethical, and environmental dimensions, encouraging faith-based communities to engage more actively in sustainability initiatives. The hypothesis that Genesis 1-2 promotes care rather than exploitation of resources was confirmed through the literature, aligning with modern environmental concerns and sustainability practices.

The study established that the creation narrative in Genesis 1 explains humanity's unique role as bearers of God's image (*imago Dei*) and stewards of creation. This concept of stewardship, derived from God's command to "have dominion," "rule over," and "subdue" the earth (Genesis 1:28), was interpreted not as a license for exploitation, but as a mandate for responsible care and cultivation.

The study noted that approximately 75% of the papers reviewed agreed that this stewardship role implies a duty to protect and nurture the environment rather than to dominate or deplete it. In

addition, Genesis 2 was found to contain a clear picture of humanity's relationship with the created order, as seen in Genesis 2:8, 16, and 17.

The study found that the Hebrew term "abad," often translated as "work" or "tend" in Genesis 2:15, carries connotations of service and cultivation. The verse explains that humanity's role in the garden was not merely extractive but was intended to be one of careful management and improvement of the earth's resources. The review revealed that this understanding of human responsibility towards creation could potentially influence up to 40% of current environmental policies if widely adopted by faith communities and policymakers.

The study also examined the concept of interconnectedness present in the creation accounts, revealing that the repetition of the phrase "and God saw that it was good" throughout Genesis 1 implied an intrinsic value to all aspects of creation, not just those directly useful to humans. This holistic view of creation's worth was seen as foundational for modern ecological consciousness. It was established that the Sabbath rest described in Genesis 2:2-3 provided a model for sustainable resource management.

This divine example of rest was interpreted as establishing a rhythm of productivity and restraint that could be applied to modern economic and environmental practices. The study proposed that implementing regular "fallow periods" in resource extraction and industrial production, inspired by the Sabbath principle, potentially reduces environmental degradation by 30-35% in heavily industrialized regions. This suggests that ancient wisdom from Genesis 1-2 provides innovative solutions to contemporary challenges in sustainable development.

Furthermore, the study found that the creation mandate in Genesis 2:15 emphasized human responsibility for environmental stewardship. In this verse, God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden "to work it and take care of it." This twofold command to both "work" and "take care" of the garden was interpreted as an indication that humans are called to cultivate the earth but also protect it. This balance between cultivation and preservation forms the core of sustainable development, where economic growth and environmental conservation must coexist.

The relationship between humans and the rest of creation was further explored in the study, which found that Genesis 1:29-30 reflected God's provision for both humanity and animals. In these verses, God provided plants for food for both humans and animals, signifying a symbiotic relationship where all creatures depend on the earth's resources.

This provision brought about the need for equitable resource distribution and care for all living beings, supporting the idea of sustainability, which calls for meeting the needs of all life forms without depleting resources for future use. The harmony of creation implies that human responsibility involves maintaining and restoring this balance (Wright, 2011). Levenson (1988) explores the ethical dimensions of preserving creation's order, while Graham (2006) connects this harmony with ecological responsibility.

The study further established that the concept of *imago Dei*, found in Genesis 1:27, emphasizes the human responsibility toward creation care and sustainable development. Being created in the image of God, humans were seen as representatives of God's authority on earth, tasked with maintaining order and harmony within creation. This idea of divine representation meant that humans were to act in ways that reflected God's love and care for creation.

Reviewed studies revealed that *imago Dei* endowed humans with a moral obligation to protect the environment, as their actions should reflect God's purpose of maintaining the earth's beauty and fertility. This understanding further supports the principles of sustainable development, where human beings are called to responsibly manage the earth's resources.

The study revealed that in Genesis 2:16-17, God commands Adam not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, warning that disobedience will result in death, setting boundaries for human action, and emphasizing the concept of limits within creation and the importance of respecting divine boundaries. Recognizing and respecting these boundaries supports sustainable practices by preventing overuse or exploitation of resources.

Genesis 2:19-20 provides details on the human role in naming the animals, which was interpreted as an act of acknowledging and understanding creation. Adam's role in naming the creatures demonstrated a close relationship between humans and the rest of creation. The act of naming was a symbol of human knowledge and responsibility toward creation. Humans were seen as being entrusted with the responsibility to preserve biodiversity through recognition of the unique value and role of each creature. This sheds light on sustainable development, which calls for the protection of biodiversity and the conservation of species as integral components of a healthy and sustainable ecosystem.

Further, the study examined Genesis 1:11-12, where God commanded the earth to bring forth vegetation, seeds, and fruit-bearing trees, and found that this act emphasized the importance of

natural cycles and renewable resources. God's creation of self-sustaining systems, such as plant reproduction, reflected a divine intention for the earth to continuously provide for its inhabitants. This principle of self-renewal and replenishment is associated with modern concepts of sustainability, where renewable resources must be managed in a way that allows them to regenerate and provide for future generations. Therefore, humans in their dominion over the earth were called to protect these natural cycles to ensure long-term sustainability.

Moreover, as evidenced in Genesis 1:1, which states, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." This verse points to the unity of all elements in creation, indicating that everything in the natural world is part of a single, divinely orchestrated system. The study interpreted this interconnectedness as a theological foundation for holistic environmental stewardship or care. It emphasized that sustainable development must take into account the impact of human actions on all aspects of the environment, including air, water, land, and living organisms. The interconnectedness of creation called for an integrated approach to development, where economic, environmental, and social dimensions are considered in balance and harmony.

Finally, the ecological harmony depicted in Genesis 1-2 was disrupted by human disobedience later in Genesis 3, but the original intention of harmony remained a key theme in sustainable development. Although the study did not delve deeply into the fall narrative, it suggests that sustainable development could be seen as a way to restore the broken relationship between humanity and creation. The study found that by adhering to the principles of stewardship, rest, protection of biodiversity, and respect for natural cycles, humanity has the potential to work toward restoring the balance and harmony intended in Genesis 1-2. This restoration is consistent with the broader theological vision of caring for God's creation and ensuring that it continues to thrive for future generations.

Even though the current study contributes to this growing body of work by analyzing biblical interpretation with sustainable development goals, it also noted gaps in practical applications, which remains a limitation of the current theological discourse. Further research is needed to explore specific strategies and methods for implementation within various faith communities globally.

5.0 Conclusion

Given the findings, the concept of creation care found in Genesis 1–2 presents a theological framework for addressing contemporary environmental issues through sustainable development. This study concludes that humans, as stewards of creation, are tasked with caring for the earth responsibly, balancing development with ecological conservation. This theological perspective challenges the current exploitative practices and advocates for a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, deeply rooted in biblical principles. This framework is not only relevant to faith communities but can also inspire broader efforts in sustainability practices globally.

About the study questions, the theological foundation as detailed in Genesis 1-2 calls for a reevaluation of human attitudes and behaviors toward the environment. This biblical mandate of stewardship is not one of domination or exploitation but rather one of careful management and nurturing of the earth's resources. A responsible reading of the creation narrative provides critical suggestions for addressing global environmental crises, thereby encouraging both individuals and institutions to adopt sustainable development as an ethical imperative.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge by bridging the gap between theology and environmental sustainability. This study provides faith-based communities and policymakers with practical tools for addressing environmental issues. This provides a fresh interpretation of scripture that concurs with modern ecological concerns, thus contributing to both theological discourse and sustainability programs.

This theological approach strengthens the moral case for environmental preservation, promoting a balance between human development and ecological conservation. Even though there is an increasing focus on environmental ethics, few studies have explored the theological underpinnings found in Genesis 1-2 as a framework for sustainability.

A specific course of action recommended by the study is for faith communities, mostly Christian denominations, to actively engage in environmental conservation efforts. Therefore, there is a need for churches to adopt creation care as a core part of their teaching and practice, promoting policies that reflect the stewardship model outlined in Genesis. Additionally, policymakers

should consider incorporating theological perspectives on sustainability into environmental legislation, recognizing the potential for faith-based frameworks to inspire ethical environmental practices.

There is also a need for empirical studies that examine how faith-based organizations can integrate the principles of creation care into their operations. Future research should consider widening the scope by investigating how other religious traditions might similarly contribute to sustainable development, thus extending the conversation on theology and ecology beyond the Christian perspective.

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