



# Revisiting the Creation Mandate 'Be Fruitful and Multiply, Fill the Earth and Subdue It' in Genesis 1:28 from an Ecotheological Perspective

Robi Panggarra<sup>1</sup>, Sabda Budiman<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Theologia Jaffray Makassar

<sup>2</sup>Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Immanuel Sintang Kal-bar

## ABSTRACT

The creation mandate that God gives to humanity is encapsulated in the phrase "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" in Genesis 1:28. This command presents challenges both in terms of interpretation and application. The main issue is whether the command to "fill the earth" remains relevant to do and fulfill, and what exactly the Bible intends by this. The command to fill the earth is also accompanied by the command to "subdue it," which carries a negative connotation. The purpose of this research is to present a discussion regarding the meaning of these two commands and to analyze their relevance in the present context. The author employs a qualitative method with an exegesis approach and literature study. The findings reveal that the command to "fill" should not only be understood literally but also spiritually. Birth, in this context, should also occur spiritually through evangelism and discipleship. Furthermore, the commands to "fill" and "subdue" are closely related, emphasizing the principles of balance and stewardship. Humanity must ensure that the human population is in harmony with available resources. This also speaks to humanity's responsibility to manage creation so that resources are sufficient for all.

Keywords: eco-theology, imago dei, creation mandate, Genesis 1:28

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**Corresponding author: Robi Panggarra** (robipanggarra80@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

The phrase “fill the earth and subdue it” presents considerable challenges for contemporary readers. Two key issues arise from this phrase: first, the meaning of “fill the earth.” Does it imply filling the earth to the point of overcrowding and congestion? Second, the term “subdue” carries a negative connotation for modern readers. How should this term be understood today to ensure its application is not misinterpreted? The central concern is the relationship between “fill” and “subdue.” Is one way of subduing the earth by filling it, and how do these two concepts relate?

Misinterpreting the command to “fill and subdue the earth” can lead to several issues, one of the most significant being population explosion. Brunner et al. state that there is a close relationship between population growth, global warming, and food security (Brunner et al., 2014, p. 72). This implies that population growth has a detrimental impact on the condition of the earth where humans live. The earth cannot withstand the social problems related to overpopulation and excessive consumption for long. Significant reduction and, ultimately, a decrease in the human population are necessary. Bell and White (2016, pp. 100, 287) argue that population growth is no longer a blessing in today's context.

On one hand, some regions view population growth as a necessity. BBC News Indonesia reported that the town of Lestijarvi in Finland offers an incentive of Rp155.5 million for each baby born, paid over ten years. This policy was implemented because in Finland, as in many other European countries, birth rates are lower than death rates (Vehviläinen, 2019).

This situation presents a dilemma when considering the facts mentioned above. Literally, humanity has begun to fulfill the command to fill the earth. However, this command indirectly brings adverse effects on humanity. On the other hand, the literal application of this command is necessary to ensure the continuity of the human race. Another issue arises: if humans do not “fill” the earth, then the command to subdue it cannot be fully realized. By reinterpreting the phrase “fill and subdue it,” we can adopt a stance on how humanity should fulfill its role as stewards and caretakers of the universe, in accordance with the teachings written in the Book of Genesis.

The research in this article can be compared with several other studies. At least two articles from Indonesia stand out. The first is by Prabowo and Malela (2023), which discusses how the child-free lifestyle contradicts God's plan, emphasizing that having children is a divine mandate to be fulfilled in marriage. Another article by Marbun and Sidabutar explores the purpose of marriage beyond mere procreation. Marbun and Sidabutar (2023) argue that the command to have children is rooted in the socio-historical context in which the verse emerged.

This research also parallels at least one global study conducted by Solomon O. Ademiluka. According to Ademiluka (2020), although God commanded humans to fill

the earth, polygamy cannot be justified by this mandate. His study highlights that Nigerian women without children should receive support from the church, which should clarify its stance that no couple is obligated to have children.

The difference between this study and previous research lies in its focus on the meaning embedded in the phrase "fill the earth," which is also connected to the phrase "subdue it." This study does not emphasize the creation mandate from the perspective of marriage but rather from the viewpoint of ecotheology. The research question is: What is the meaning of the creation mandate "fill the earth and subdue it" in Genesis 1:28 from an ecotheological perspective?

## **METHOD**

The author employs the grammatical-historical hermeneutical method to analyze the text and context of Genesis 1:26-28. Several steps are undertaken, including lexical investigation of the words (lexiology) "fill" and "subdue," grammatical investigation of the phrase context, historical investigation, and considering the context of the surrounding verses (Silalahi, 2021, pp. 47–48). The author also uses a literature review approach to assess the relevance of the textual analysis to issues of population growth, procreation, and environmental stewardship. Commentaries, books on ecotheology, and journal articles are the types of documents the author used in the literature review approach. The research process involves the following steps: First, the author examines the chosen phrases and conducts an analysis according to scientific principles. Second, by connecting these phrases with the historical and theological background of the verses, the author performs a contextual analysis. Third, the findings are linked to the ecotheological perspective, highlighting how these insights can be applied to modern procreation practices.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Analysis of the Words “Fill” and “Subdue”**

#### **“Fill”**

The word used for "fill" is *male*, which means "to become full, to fill, to fulfill." Besides its verbal form (imperative), this word also functions as an adjective, translating to "full, fullness, a full result, pruning, sanctification." It can sometimes be translated as "to fulfill" (Jenni & Westermann, 1994, p. 852). This word frequently illustrates God's omnipresence, as seen in Jeremiah 23:24: "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth? declares the LORD." God is not only universally present, filling the earth with His glory (Ps. 72:19; Isa. 6:3), but His glory (*kabod*) is also visibly manifested locally in the cloud that

fills the Tabernacle (Ex. 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11; Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 10:3; Ezek. 43:5; Ezek. 44:4) (Harris et al., 2003, p. 1195).

Metaphorically, the earth is often described as being filled with violence (Gen. 6:13; Mic. 6:12; Jer. 23:10; Jer. 51:5; Ezek. 7:22) and occasionally filled with glory, mercy, goodness, and the knowledge of God (Ps. 33:5; Ps. 119:64; Isa. 11:9; Hab. 3:3). This term is used in various contexts, such as the land being filled with sin (Jer. 16:18; Ezek. 8:17). To "fill someone's hand" (with an offering) means to "sanctify" their service (Isa. 29:5; Ex. 32:29) or to become a priest (Judg. 17:5). Similarly, fulfilling someone's desire means to "satisfy" them (Ex. 15:9). When Isaiah witnessed the vision of his calling, the whole earth was filled with His glory (Isa. 6:3) (Harris et al., 2003, p. 1196). In the New Testament, this is paralleled by the word *pleroo*, which appears in the perfect tense when quoting the Old Testament. This form signifies a completed action with ongoing consequences (Ambrus, 2017, p. 135).

Essentially, the word means "to become full" in the sense of doing something to someone. In 2 Kings 4:6, it means "to fill," as seen in the verse, "And it happened when the vessels were full, she said..." This verb is sometimes used figuratively, as in Genesis 6:13, when God notes that "the earth was full of violence." When used transitively, the verb implies the action or state of "filling something." In Genesis 1:22 (the first occurrence of the word), God commands the creatures of the sea to "fill" the waters, but not to the point of depletion. The word "overflow" can also mean "to fill" in the sense of being full, as when the glory of the LORD filled the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34) (Vine et al., 2016, p. 139).

The meaning and usage of the word *male* outlined above carry a range of interpretations. There is a literal sense of being physically full, but in some contexts in the Old Testament, "full" is also understood figuratively—not physically full, but conceptually full. However, in the context of Genesis 1:28, the command to "fill" is understood literally. Humans are indeed commanded to fill the earth, though the exact boundaries of "fullness" are not specified.

### ***“Subdue it”***

Although recent interpretations of Genesis 1:28 have attempted to explain the word "subdue" as a responsibility to build, a comprehensive study of the word's usage makes it clear that this interpretation is inaccurate. The word *kabash* implies that the subdued party opposes the one subduing them, necessitating force if subjugation is to occur. Thus, the word carries a connotation of "rape" in Esther 7:8 or the conquest of the Canaanites in Numbers 32:22 and 32:29. In 2 Chronicles 28:10 and Jeremiah 34:11, for example, it refers to forced enslavement (Harris et al., 2003, p. 951). Violence and subjugation, particularly against women and marginalized groups, are evident. A notable

example is the story of Dinah in Genesis 34 when she was "forced" by Shechem (Iatan, 2023, p. 23).

Therefore, the word "subdue" in Genesis 1:28 suggests that creation will not willingly or easily follow human will and that humans must subdue creation through its strength. This is not about dominating creation. However, there is a perversion within humanity that leads people to approach such tasks with violent and destructive enthusiasm. Despite their efforts, humans cannot fully subdue creation. But creation can be subdued, and this is the promise of Micah 7:10 (Harris et al., 2003, p. 951). Micah's prophetic vision emphasizes hope and redemption, showing that although humanity may struggle against the inclination to conquer violently, there is a divine promise of restoration and peace within creation. Goswell (2019, p. 153) notes that Micah's prophecy reflects a future vision where justice is upheld and the power of past oppression is overcome.

It is important to note that this command was given before humanity fell into sin, even before humans were formed from dust and clay. We must view the command to "subdue" as a positive directive, one that the first humans received with pure understanding, mindset, and motivation. It was the application of this command, which later resulted in destructive actions and excessive exploitation, that was corrupted by sin, altering humanity's mindset and motives toward creation.

The command to subdue the earth should also be viewed from the perspective of humanity as the image of God. The verb *kabash* suggests that humans are viewed as rulers, or kings, over creation (Jenni & Westermann, 1994, p. 1355). A king is meant to be a leader who governs in such a way that both the ruler and the subjects benefit from the rule. This speaks to the skill, wisdom, and expertise of a king in his governance. Once again, this must be understood in the context of humanity before the fall, where the kingly status was purely meant to glorify God, not to damage or exploit creation at will. This does not mean that the command was canceled after humanity fell; it still applies, even though its application has deviated. However, Christ's sacrifice brings shalom and a transformation in humanity's paradigm and motives toward creation, which had been corrupted before.

## **Context of the Phrase "Fill the Earth and Subdue It" in Genesis 1:26-28**

### ***The Image and Likeness of God (Imago Dei)***

Even after the fall, humans are still considered to be created in the image and likeness of God. However, humans need to be renewed according to the image of the One who created them (James 3:9) (Kidner, 2008, p. 60). The intrinsic image of God in humans, such as will, free will, self-awareness, and morality, remains intact and is not

lost (Karaianis, 2018, p. 12). The fall of humanity did not entirely erase God's image, but it requires restoration or renewal through faith and spiritual transformation.

In the Old Testament context, the term "image" is used to describe how a king might create a statue of himself to assert his power in places where the king himself could not be present. Just as a statue reflects the presence and authority of a king, humans reflect the glory of God (Longman, 2016, p. 67). This term can also refer to human rationality and moral capacity. Humans are seen as God's creation, reflecting His nature and character. Loke (2016, p. 160) emphasizes that the phrase "image and likeness of God" signifies the unique position of humans within creation, highlighting their functional and relational roles rather than a physical resemblance. This statement further reinforces that humans are created by God and possess value and purpose derived from the Creator.

The Image of God is not intended only for men. Although women were created from man's rib, this does not mean that women were created in the image and likeness of men. While both have distinct roles and characteristics, they both originate from the same Source. Steinmann (2019, p. 74) emphatically states that both men and women bear the image of God. This reaffirms that men and women have equality and the same standing before God, despite their different roles and characteristics. Both share equal dignity in the eyes of God.

God created both man and woman in His image, and both share in His image. The roles of men and women are not merely those of companions but also partners in procreation (Hamilton, 1995, p. 83). This statement does not imply that man is half the image of God and woman is the other half. Each is a complete image of God. Instead, it refers to the complementary relationship between man and woman. They each play a complementary role in creating balance within the family. Together, they share the responsibility of preserving and sustaining human life. They must cooperate in generating a new "image of God" through procreation. Without mutual willingness and unity through intimate relations, they cannot produce offspring.

### ***The Image of God Spreading Across the Earth***

The previous context discusses humans being created in the image and likeness of God. When linked to the command for humans to fill the earth, it implies that the image of God would spread throughout the world. Procreation inherently aims to disseminate the image of God across the earth. The creation of humanity marks the pinnacle of God's creative sequence, with a special purpose: humans were created in His image to establish a partnership with God.

It is important to note that the word used for "image of God" is *tselem*, which, in the Old Testament, often refers to idols or carved objects worshipped by pagan nations. However, uniquely in Genesis, *tselem* is applied to humans (Brown et al., 2011, p. 853). This does not suggest that non-human creation should worship humans or view them as

representatives of God to be venerated. Instead, it highlights the unique position of humans within God's creation order. Zuck (2021, p. 35) emphasizes that humans are not made in the image of God; rather, they are the image of God itself. Humans are wholly the image of God, regardless of physical attributes, social status, or intelligence—every person embodies the image of God fully.

The wholeness of the image of God must then be examined in the context of filling the earth. Prabowo and Malela interpret Genesis 1:28 as a command to populate the previously empty earth with the images of God, represented by human existence (Prabowo & Malela, 2023, p. 19). The command to fill the earth with the image of God (humans) is closely related to the command to subdue it. How can humanity effectively "subdue" the earth if it has not yet explored and inhabited all its regions?

## **Revisiting Through the Perspective of Ecotheology**

### ***Varied Meanings of "Fill the Earth"***

The command "fill the earth" appears in Genesis 1:28. This directive was given to the first humans, Adam and Eve, as part of their duty to manage God's creation. The instruction to "fill the earth" underscores humanity's responsibility to increase the human population through procreation. This command carries multiple meanings, particularly within the context of both procreation and human stewardship of the earth.

Some views assert that this command was meant only for that specific time. This perspective begins with the phrase "God blessed them," rather than "God commanded them." The necessity that forms this divine blessing is not a command to be strictly obeyed, but a privilege and aspiration to be embraced and pursued. The imperative, alongside the *justive*, often appears within the declaration of a blessing, not as a command, but to highlight the power inherent in that blessing (Marbun & Sidabutar, 2023, p. 422).

In Christian marriage, having children is not a necessity. The command to "be fruitful and multiply" cannot be applied literally in today's context. Whether a marriage produces children or not, it can still glorify God (Marbun & Sidabutar, 2023, pp. 422–423). Marriage is a lifelong union between a man and a woman, forming the foundation for building a family and providing a stable environment. The primary purpose of marriage is to glorify God and support each other through life's challenges. In some cases, couples may choose not to have children due to medical reasons or a desire to focus on careers or other pursuits. This decision does not diminish the ability of their marriage to glorify God. Rather, a marriage can honor God with or without children, as long as it is conducted with love, mutual respect, and adherence to religious values.

Additionally, the argument that the command to fill the earth applied only to that time arises from God's instructions in Genesis 1:22 and 28, given when the earth was still empty and needed to be populated with humans and animals. Today, the earth is no longer

empty, as it is "filled with Your creatures" (Psalm 104:24). The mandated increase has already occurred (Bell & White, 2016, p. 287). This does not imply that humanity should cease procreation altogether, but rather that wisdom is needed to assess current circumstances. Balance and sustainability for both humanity and the environment must be maintained. The command to "be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it" can be interpreted to suggest that procreation should be moderated when the earth is already filled and subdued. In the past, the idea of the earth being fully populated was unimaginable, so there was no reason to acknowledge limitations. However, the modern context is quite different, as the earth is becoming increasingly crowded and shows signs of being "full" (Berry & Feuerherm, 2006, p. 96).

On the other hand, some firmly believe that the command to "fill the earth" remains relevant today. Debates and objections arise concerning the relevance of this command in the current context. If the planet can no longer support and sustain human life, restrictions on births may be imposed by authorities. Within a hundred years, the global human population might drastically decline, possibly leading to extinction. Such a scenario would have significant consequences, including severe poverty and disease due to the loss of human resources needed to cure illnesses, maintain systems, and develop new technologies. Would extinction align with God's will, and would it bring glory to His name? (Kulikovsky, 2012, p. 43). Clearly, this is not God's will, but rather a consequence of humanity's failure to heed His call to be faithful stewards of the earth and to fill it within the framework of sustainability.

### ***The Phrases "Fill" and "Subdue" as Balance and Stewardship in Relation to the Image of God***

The first command (be fruitful and multiply) must be carried out to fulfill the next command (subdue the earth). This implies a connection between the number of humans and their capacity to subdue the earth. As the population grows, men and women assume roles as kings and queens among the creatures of the earth. The verb *radah* in other biblical texts is used to describe royal authority (1 Kings 5:4; Isaiah 14:6; Ezekiel 34:4). Both *radah* and *kabash* in the terminology of the Egyptian and Babylonian courts refer to the king's royal duties. Before the fall, this command did not suggest exploitation (Longman, 2016, p. 68). Thus, understanding the command to "subdue" should be seen in the context of a pre-fall humanity, not equated with post-fall human understanding.

Despite the extensive literature exploring the phrase "image of God," Arnold (2009, p. 46) highlights in his previous explanation that this phrase, similar to Egyptian and Mesopotamian contexts, relates to royal language, where the king or pharaoh is known as "the image of a god". Humans, as rulers of creation, govern interdependently. This mirrors the royal context, where a king governs his people with skill and wisdom to ensure prosperity and peace, benefiting both king and subjects. Similarly, the command

to "subdue" should not be viewed as a directive for dictatorial rule over all creation. Instead, it must be understood within the context of delegation and blessing, emphasizing harmony and mutual benefit (McKeown, 2008, p. 40). Dabrowa (2018, p. 253) also explains that the idea of subduing in the Old Testament context involves building a well-ordered and harmonious community.

Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis discusses humanity's responsibility in relation to God's command: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over..." (Genesis 1:28), viewing it as a command to practice skilled dominion. In his exegesis, Brunner and others argue that practicing skilled dominion among creatures is linked to the previous blessing on animals (Genesis 1:22) and is carried out with an awareness of the gifts of the earth—fruits provided by God for humans and creatures (Genesis 1:29-30). He suggests that the first example of human expertise is ensuring that there are enough resources for all, that resources are shared, and that justice is practiced. Today, it seems that if global warming, freshwater depletion, deforestation, land degradation, species extinction, and overpopulation are any indicators, the practice of skilled dominion is almost certainly being lost (Brunner et al., 2014, p. 73).

Boorse (2003) offers an interpretation of the meaning of "fill" in relation to human population growth. There are three key principles contained in this command when viewed in context: the principles of balance, wisdom, and responsibility. The commands to "fill" and "subdue" must be understood together. They address the balance and skill needed to solve problems related to consumption and population growth. Concerns about population growth indicate humanity's failure to responsibly steward the nature entrusted to us (Boorse, 2003, p. 163). The Bible provides many examples, such as Abraham and Lot needing to move as there was insufficient land to accommodate many people and animals (Genesis 13:6). The people of Israel grew rapidly in the land of Egypt (Genesis 1:8-12) (Boorse, 2003, p. 164). This emphasizes the importance of responsible stewardship of the earth. Furthermore, Cockburn et al. (2019, p. 1) highlight that both commands reflect two concepts: the responsible use and care of nature, and the balancing act between utilizing and conserving available resources. This perspective further strengthens the idea that the mandate to "subdue" involves a commitment to sustainable practices that ensure the availability and health of the environment.

### ***Spiritual Practice of Procreation***

God's command to the first humans to fill the earth was carried out through procreation. Simply put, procreation is the act or process of having offspring. However, the act of procreation raises several issues related to the interpretation of the command in Genesis to "fill" the earth and the current realities of the state of the world. This led to the development of a global plan: birth control.

Not everyone agrees with birth control programs and principles. One of the main reasons for opposition is the command from God to fill the earth. Those who oppose birth control argue that the word "fill" should be understood as "fill the earth to overflowing." Birth control is viewed as a denial of God's sovereignty. God, who is sovereign, opens and closes the womb, so decisions regarding the timing and number of children are within His control. The command in Genesis 1:28 is a corporate command, rather than directed to a specific individual. Every couple, as a whole, is expected to bear children, except for those who are unmarried or those who cannot have children due to physical limitations or infertility (Kulikovsky, 2012, p. 44). Couples who do not have children, or more specifically, societies or nations that do not produce offspring at a level that ensures the long-term survival and sustainability of humanity, are viewed as failing to uphold the mandate given by God and rebelling against Him.

However, the understanding and arguments above are not entirely accurate. In his commentary, Matthew Poole (1990) suggests that the phrase "fill the earth" implies two things: First, it is a command requiring humans to multiply in order to prevent extinction. This was a binding command for Adam and Eve, Noah, and their children and their wives. Second, this command is more of a promise or blessing than a strict order. The phrase "fill the earth" is a permission, not a command, even though it is expressed as a command. If it was truly a command, it would also require everyone to exercise dominion over fish, birds, and other creatures, which would be unreasonable (Poole, 1990). This means that procreation is necessary to preserve the human race on earth. Indirectly, "conquering" the earth requires a large population of humans (but not excessive). Thus, there needs to be a balance between the command to "fill the earth" and "subdue it," and this is not a mandate that signifies an authoritarian relationship, but rather a collaborative one with nature (Iwamony, 2024, p. 2). Therefore, the command should be understood in context, meaning a reasonable and balanced application, as explained earlier, where the phrase "fill and subdue it" refers to the balance and skill needed to provide for the needs and sustainability of creation.

Ultimately, the term "fill" should be understood in the light of Christ and spirituality. In modern times, the emphasis on offspring and family has shifted from natural birth to a focus on a new family that is open to all, regardless of lineage. For instance, when Jesus was told that His mother and brothers were waiting outside, He responded that whoever does the will of God is His brother and mother (Mark 3:33). The concept of fertility has been spiritually transformed. Eusebius devoted part of his *Demonstratio Evangelica* to the question: "Why is producing many offspring no longer a primary concern in Christianity as it was in the Old Testament?" He explained that "the concern of elders for bearing children does not apply to Christians today" because now "preachers of the Word" (including the celibate) "raise not one or two children but an extraordinary number" through spiritual birth. This spiritual multiplication happens

"daily, fulfilling the divine command to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth' in a truer and more divine sense" (Bell & White, 2016, p. 286). The primary mission of Christianity today is not just to produce biological children—a point that should be emphasized by stakeholders such as pastors, families, and the Church—but also to nurture spiritual children (Marbun & Sidabutar, 2023, p. 423).

## **CONCLUSION**

The command to "fill" and "subdue" the earth in the Book of Genesis is understood more deeply and contextually when viewed from the perspective before humanity's fall into sin, and the earth was still unpopulated. This command remains relevant, but it should be interpreted with an emphasis on balance and responsible stewardship of resources. Humans, as bearers of God's image, are entrusted with the responsibility to fill and govern the earth wisely, ensuring that resources are sufficient for all living beings and that environmental sustainability is maintained. For Christians, the concept of "filling the earth" goes beyond physical procreation; it also encompasses spiritual growth through discipleship and evangelism, so that new believers can mature in their faith and, in turn, guide others.

## **Competing interests**

In writing this article, the author has no competing interests.

## **Author contributions**

R.P. designed the research and explored the underlying language of the biblical text problems analyzed and S.B. participated in finding relevant reference support and deepening the analysis in this article.

## **Ethical considerations**

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## **Data availability**

This research is exegesis research (literature), so there is no data collection to the field, only using the references listed as theory and reinforcement of ideas.

## **Disclaimer**

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