

# Creation as a Cosmic Temple: Reading Genesis 1:1–2:4a in Light of Willie van Heerden’s Ecological Insights

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## Abstract

This article is based on Willie van Heerden’s insight into the ecological retrieval of the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:26–27. According to Van Heerden, human dominion has a meaning only when it is read in relationship with the crisis context of the text and particularly the symmetrical structure of Genesis 1:1–2:4a as a whole. In this sense, one discovers that creation does not culminate with human supremacy or dominion, but with celebration (Sabbath). Creation is a kind of sanctuary, a cosmic temple in which every block counts. The created order is sacred and thus all members of creation are associated with God. Hence, whatever human dominion might mean, it has to treat creation with respect as a sacred arena.

**Keywords:** creation; cosmic temple; *imago Dei*; human dominion; Sabbath; ecological hermeneutics; Willie van Heerden

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It is an honour to contribute to this Festschrift celebrating the life and scholarly legacy of Professor Willie van Heerden. As promoter of both my master's and doctoral degrees,<sup>2</sup> Van Heerden nurtured my passion for the ecological reading of the Bible. I learned much from him, both on a scholarly and a human level. As a biblical scholar and eco-theologian, Van Heerden insisted that one must do justice to both the text and current issues when reading ancient texts to address contemporary issues. This can be seen in his scholarly article on Genesis 1:28 as he reacted against the ecological framework of the Earth Bible Series developed by Norman Habel and the Earth Bible Team in Australia (Van Heerden 2005)

Habel and the Earth Bible Team have launched the most detailed ecological hermeneutics in biblical studies. They developed an ecological framework based on six eco-justice principles and a threefold hermeneutic: suspicion, identification and retrieval.<sup>3</sup> The six eco-justice principles are ecologically fruitful when the text complies with them. In other words, the interpretative authority lies not in the biblical texts, but in these principles, regarded as the norms by which the validity of the text is assessed (Horrell 2009, 168). In this way, the Earth Bible's approach is highly geocentric, resisting and rejecting biblical texts that are deemed ecologically harmful.

Habel argued, for instance, that Gen 1:26–28 is a “grey text, a text that is ecologically destructive, devaluing Earth and offering humans a God-given right to harness nature” (Habel 2009, 9). These three verses are contrasted with the rest of the priestly creation account (Gen 1:1–2:4a) where God and Earth are partners. For Habel, the primary story of the text is the *Earth story* (Gen 1:1–25; 1:31–2:4a), which is interrupted by the *human story* (Gen 1:26–30). According to him these two texts are in conflict, with people set over and against Earth (Habel 2000, 47).

Indeed, God's creation method in Genesis 1 involved either the separation of the existing domains of the primeval world or the generation of new things from the ordered realms. In the text, light is separated from darkness (Gen 1:4), waters above from waters below (Gen 1:6–7) and day from night (Gen 1:14); animals and plants emerged from the land, sea and air (Gen 11–13). The earth works with God to generate life in the created order.

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2 Both the master's dissertation (Kavusa 2013) and the doctoral thesis (Kavusa 2019) have been published as monographs.

3 For more detail regarding the Earth Bible ecological framework, see The Earth Bible Team (2000) and Habel (2008, 1–8).

However, the creation of humans has no link with any existing domain of the primeval world and the created order. Contrary to flora and fauna species, humans are not created (ברא) from the earth (ארץ), but they are made (עשה) in God's image to rule over (רדה) animals and to subdue (כבש) the earth (Gen 1:26–27). In Habel's words, "humans are not one among many living creatures formed by God to share the planet, but that superior species who is given the mandate to rule (רדה) over other living creatures" (Habel 2008, 6).

Indeed, in its immediate context, verse 28 provides humans with absolute power over nature. The earth appears to be a domain for human conquest and control (Jüngling 1981, 30). The dominion mandate seems to provide a justification for devaluing and disempowering not only the earth beings, but also the earth itself for human advantage. In this sense, Veronica Brady declares that

the lack of care for the earth and its creatures—the arrogant assumption that they exist merely for us to use and exploit—can be traced back to the Bible and, in particular, to God's command to increase and multiply, 'fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over ... every living thing' (Gen.1.28). In this view, far from being the word of life, the Bible brings a word of death and has little or nothing positive to contribute to the struggle for Earth and for the future of humanity. (Brady 2000, 13)

The framework of the Earth Bible Team makes Earth, the victim of today's ecological crisis, the focal point for reading Genesis 1. However, the exilic/post-exilic context of Genesis 1 makes people the primary victims. According to Van Heerden, both Habel's interpretation framework (the Earth Bible Project) and Genesis 1 have a crisis context, both give special focus to the victim, and both use a cosmological framework in an attempt to deconstruct dominant, destructive forces (Van Heerden 2005, 373).

The problem with Habel's interpretation, Van Heerden explained, is that it gives prominence to a contemporary crisis over the crisis of the text. In so doing, justice is not done for either world, and one ends up condemning or justifying one worldview over and against the other. Van Heerden argued that reading the text from the sole perspective of the earth would prevent the interpreter from giving attention to its exilic context, as well as its visible symmetrical and schematic features, which make Genesis 1:1–2:4a a kind of *cosmic temple* (Van Heerden 2005, 391). Genesis 1 is a cosmic network where every being is allotted a place and mission to fulfil for the maintenance of the whole.

In view of this problem, Van Heerden encouraged interpreting the text from the perspective of Genesis 1 as a whole, and not the earth story (Gen 1:1–25; 2:1–4a) against the human story (Gen 1:26–30). The fight for the wellbeing of Earth and that of people should not be regarded as two exclusive and different processes. In other words, the healing of human beings, the restoration of social disruption and the maintenance of ecological balance should be regarded as a single process (Van Heerden 2005, 391). According to Genesis, human history and that of the earth are interwoven and circumscribed within creation as a sanctuary.

In this way, Van Heerden concludes that if Habel had read all of Genesis 1 against a victim background (exile) and the symmetrical structure of the text (Gen 1:1–2:4a), it would have freed him from envying parts of the text with the suspicion of *grey* (Gen 1:26–30) or *green* (Gen 1:1–25; 2:1–4a) (Van Heerden 2005, 391). It would have helped him to escape what he deems to be in conflict: the dualism of humans towards earth. Likewise, it will help other interpreters to refrain from using Genesis 1 as an example of biblical texts supporting people’s indifference towards nature.

Therefore, using elements of socio-historical analysis coupled with Van Heerden’s ecological insights as highlighted above, this article examines the question of the extent to which Genesis 1:1–2:4a as a whole can be ecologically insightful. The text as a whole presents exciting ecological wisdom when humans are seen not as the pinnacle, but as part of the cosmic network. Creation is a kind of *cosmic temple* culminating, not with humans, but with the celebration of Sabbath. In this way, creation as a whole is sanctified and is allotted the status of a sacred arena.

### Genesis 1:1–2:4a: Socio-literary Contexts

Van Heerden pays attention to the socio-literary issues of Genesis 1 (Van Heerden 2005, 374). These are relevant to enter into the way of thinking of the text in order to avoid thoughts that are foreign to its worldview. This will also enable us to assess the literary integrity of the text, the basis for our ecological investigation.

### The Babylonian Exile and Genesis 1

The Babylonian exile of 587 BCE left the land of Judah תוהו ובוהו (a formless void). The exilic experience crushed the Judean community’s self-confident Zionist theology, which was centred on the pillars of land, king and temple—all of which were lost during the exile. In other words, the exilic experience robbed this community of the story they lived by. One of the main questions was how they could then construct a new, hopeful story to live by. It is in this way, said Van Heerden, that the Priestly writer imagined rewriting crucial elements of the Israelites’ identity, particularly the temple motif and kingship, and placed them in a larger narrative context, “a story of the cosmos, of what happened before them and what may happen after” (Van Heerden 2014, 559).

The message of Genesis 1:1–2:4a is therefore that the God who brought forth creation order out of formlessness can indeed transform any chaotic situation into a new creation (Gous and Van Heerden 2006, 178). In that respect, Genesis 1 is not a creation story in the first place, but a confession made in hopeless circumstances in which there was no comfort. To do it, the Priestly creation account proceeds not by the banishment of chaos, but by reordering elements of chaos into a coherent and hopeful creation. In other words,

[In] building the new structure that is creation, God functions like an Israelite priest, making distinctions, assigning things to their proper category and assessing their fitness, and hallowing the Sabbath. (Levenson 1994, 127)

In this way, creation is conceived in terms of structure building where every creature is allotted a task for the restoration of the whole. For the exiles, Genesis 1:1–2:4a provided a hopeful programme on the way to proceed with this rebuilding project, notably by involving all sectors of the dispersed peoples and by enlisting them in the enormous cooperative task of reconstruction (Brown 2010, 48).

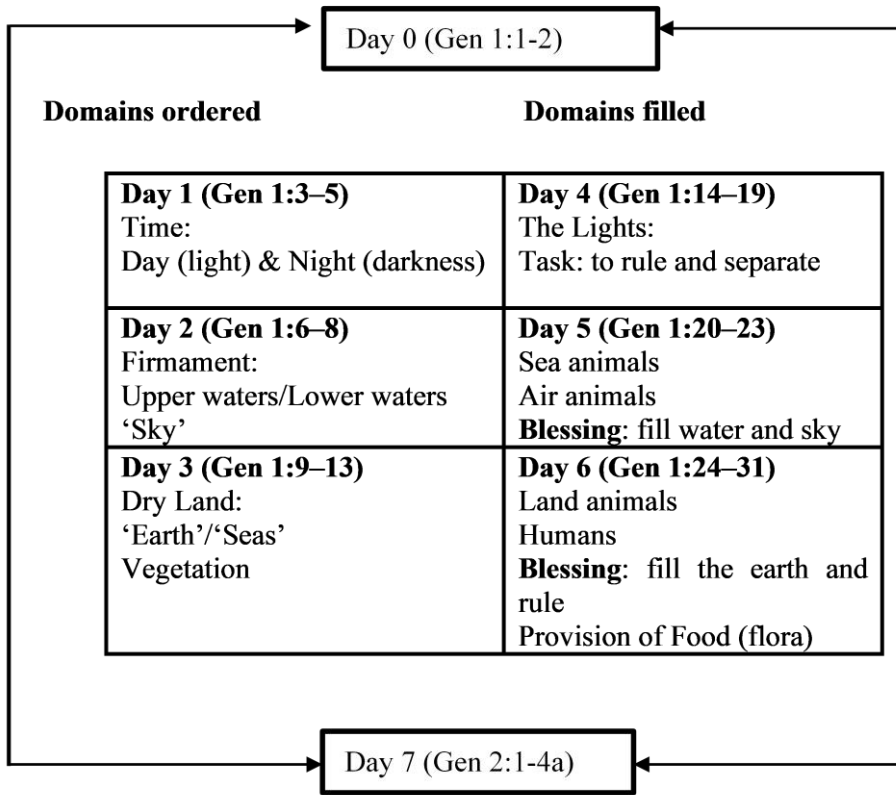
In Genesis 1, Elohim made the universe with ease and natural power similar to the way Cyrus ended the despotic reign of Babylon. Some scholars have argued that the cooperative skill, as opposed to conquest actions, embedded throughout the Priestly creation ideal relate to something like the “violence-free” principle that Cyrus aimed to establish in replacement of the Babylonian tyranny (De Pury 2009, 103). For this reason, Cyrus is praised in Deutero-Isaiah as the messiah of Yahweh (Is 44:28; 45:1).

Contrary to the Babylonian power, Cyrus in 538 BCE authorised the return of the exiles to rebuild their homeland. It is possibly in relation to this new policy that the Priestly creation account was written. The restoration of Judah’s land and temple required the involvement of all the community. In this sense, the creation of Genesis 1:1–2:4a is presented as a self-sustaining cooperative realm conveying a fully ordered cosmos made possible by the implicit teamwork of its various components, all serving the ultimate purpose: achieving the טוב־מאד (“very good”) of the created order (Gen 1:31).

### Cosmic Structure of Genesis 1:1–2:4a

In Genesis 1, the creator’s word had never meant to bring into being what was about to be created, but to establish order. The creator’s commands had the function of stating the structures that were to be set up (days 1–3), to designate the inhabitants that were to occupy the different ordered spaces (days 4–6) and to define their function within the world-to-be (Steck 1975, 32). The divine word assigns both the basic cosmic structures (vv. 5, 8, 10) and blesses the manifold ecosystem species (vv. 22–28).

Genesis 1:1–2:4a is deemed to be “the most densely structured text of the biblical corpus, characterised by an intricate array of correspondences and variations” (Brown 1999, 36). In this sense, Van Heerden (2005, 372) believes that to understand what Genesis 1:1–2:4a says about creation, one should pay attention to the text as a whole as follows:



**Figure 1:** Symmetric structure of Genesis 1:1-2:4a<sup>4</sup>

The first six days of creation establish the architectural spatial limits, while the seventh day unfolds the most holy space, and thereby makes the P creation account the model of a temple—an *imago tempili* (Brown 2010, 40). While the first three days involve the habitat, the latter three deal with the installation of the inhabitants: the lights in the sky (fourth day), the sea and air animals (fifth day) and the land animals and humans (sixth day). The seventh day parallels day 0 (Gen 1:1–2) contrasting a chaotic cosmos (v. 2) with an ordered and healthy cosmic network (Gen 2:1–4a).

The organisation of the cosmos involves not only God, but also the intermediaries—water, earth or sea (days three and five) and even the lights separating the day from the night (Gen 1:14). The result of the text is a sevenfold structure of a fully interconnected and ordered creation.

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4 This schema is adapted from the model proposed by Brown (1999, 38).

## Ecological Retrieval of the Text

### The Significance of בראשית

Those Bible translations that follow the LXX's idea of creation *ex nihilo* read בראשית ברא אלהים (in the beginning, God created...) instead of the Masoretic version בראשית (Gen 1:1). In this sense, the word is provided with a definite article that makes it a determinative noun in the sense of an absolute time of God's creation (Lim 2002, 305). Genesis 1:1 is then regarded as an independent clause resuming the work of the six days of creation.

However, in comparison with ancient Near Eastern accounts, Gen 1:1 sustains that order is made not *ex-nihilo*, but from a chaotic and unformed world. In this sense, Gen 1:1 should be regarded as pointing only forward, assuming that the following verses will explain further the way this order really occurred (Holmstedt 2008, 59). In other words, Gen 1:1 does not mark an absolute start in time, but the beginning of God's action of ברא. The beginning is introduced by בראשית while the action itself is narrated as a process involving God and parts of the cosmos.

### Translating ברא as an Act of Separating Out (Gen 1:1)

A close reading of Gen 1:1–2:4a reveals that the verb ברא does not refer to the action of bringing into existence, but “establishing order.” This idea fits with the ANE myths where the first line of a cosmogony expresses not a bringing into existence, but the separation of the sky from the earth. The idea behind the verb ברא “is not about God creating everything, but about stages of separating, ordering and activating domains of the cosmos” (Habel 2011, 28). That is why when God is the exclusive creator, the text rather makes use of the verb עשה (Gen 1:25).

In addition to the linguistic utterances supporting the sense “to separate” of the verb ברא, the noun “creator” is often linked with other roots, such as קנה, עשה or יצר. This is attested to in the inscription אל קנה ארץ of the seventh century BCE relating to Gen 14:19 depicting El Elyon as the creator of the world (אל עלין קנה שמים וארץ) (Miller 1980, 45). In Gen 1, ברא does not mean to create but to separate structures of the universe in order for them to fulfil their proper function. The root ברא means here to bring something into existence functionally, not physically (Walton 2008, 58). Therefore, the Hebrew word ברא should be understood within a functional ontology in terms of role or function assignment through separation.

### Primeval Stage of the Universe (Gen 1:2)

The initial situation on earth is characterised by תהו ובהו. The expression תהו ובהו emphasises the chaotic state of ארץ that lacks form and life (Van Wolde 1998, 24). The expression refers to a situation in which life on earth is impossible (Isa 45:18) or to the conditions that prevent habitation (Job 6:18). Therefore, תהו ובהו means not only the

sterility of the earth resulting in hunger and thirst, but the absence of what enables life in the cosmos: structures (Beauchamp 1969, 163).

The expression refers then to a situation of the world where all the material for its ordering was in an undifferentiated, unorganised, confused and lifeless agglomeration (Cassuto 1961, 23). Genesis 1:2 describes *תהו ובהו* as the amalgam of three features in the primeval world: *רעה*, *תהום* and *חשך*.

In contrast to the Akkadian goddesses of the deep, Thiamat, *תהום* is depersonalised and refers only to the natural world-ocean, a mere physical concept of the unnamed mass of waters prevailing prior to the division of waters above from waters below. *Tehom* is covered by *חשך* to darken the image of the earth before the created order, but the *ruach Elohim* was covering the deep. Although there are debates about the true meaning of the word *ruach* (*רוח*) as wind or spirit, the word should refer to a particular aspect of the primeval world. In this way, any spiritualisation of the word is to be avoided. One should recognise that elsewhere, the Priestly material uses the word *רוח* in the physical sense of wind in relation to the waters (Gen 8:11; Exod 14:21).

The expression *רוח אלהים* does not then refer to what the KJV translated as spirit, an immaterial reality in contrast to nature/matter, but the cosmic atmospheric winds and variations, which the NRSV and the JPSV rendered as wind instead of spirit. The text emphasises the physical and natural aspect of the word. It means both atmospheric winds and the “air (breath) that all the living beings will need to survive” (Hiebert 2008, 15).

In this sense, various scholars read the noun *אלהים* as playing an intensifying role as in other expressions, such as the “fire of God” (Job 1:16) (Albertz 1997, 1204). This does not erode the religious connotation of the noun *אלהים*. The genitive syntax *רוח-אלהים* would then mean God’s presence within the waste cosmos since in the ancient Near East the wind was perceived as God’s breath (Van Dyk 2001). This *רוח* originates from God, it is God’s, it is a medium of God’s revelation, and it is an indication of his presence in the world; *רוח* is sacred (Hiebert 2008, 13).

Ecologically speaking, *רוח* makes the claim that God and the world are not separate but indissolubly connected, and that the atmosphere we inhabit or the air we breathe is not just a “thing” but an aspect of God’s own presence in the world. In fact, *רוח* subverts the materialistic view of nature as merely an object, but constitutes as a sacred realm. The atmosphere and respiration are really sacred, and any attitude that may cause the pollution of *רוח* is an insult against God.



## Establishing the Network (vv. 3–31)

From Genesis 1:3 on, the ordering and populating of the sky and the earth starts and develops until it is concluded and summarised in Genesis 2:4a. The Hebrew syntax always starts with a series of *wayyiqtol* forms וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים combined with the fulfilment clause וַיְהִי־כֵן before ending with the appreciation formula כִּי־טוֹב. Elohim is the main architect of the network, but he also involved the earth and waters to generate new forms of life (flora and fauna).

### Setting of the Time (Day 1; vv. 3–5)

God caused אור (light) not to destroy חשך (darkness) but to alternate with it. In this way, God separated one from another so that their rotations cause day (יוֹם) and night (לַיְלָה). God's intention is not therefore the creation of the light, but the setting of time, the rhythm day-night, which is relevant in an ordered creation. In other words, verse 3 can be read, "let there be a period of light" (Walton 2008, 59).

For that reason, Genesis 1:3–5 give no more details about the light and darkness, but their separation (וַיַּבְדֵּל) and identification as respectively day and night. This separation implies that the primeval world was a chaotic mixture of day and night in the תהוּ בְהוּ situation. That is why God does not abolish darkness, but allows its alternation with light as two sides of time. Therefore, since the first day ends with God naming light day, and darkness night, it is likely that:

The text (Gen 1:3–5) is not talking about the light and darkness brought into being as material beings ... but that they are established as periods. The introduction of light [אור] was the means of creating day and night. It is the period of light that is called day, and the period of darkness that is called night. (Walton 2008, 59)

Through this inaugural act, the elementary condition of life is launched, the framework of time. This is supported by Amos 4:13 in which the initial act of God in the cosmos is also related to time: "he who makes dawn/day (שָׁחַר) into darkness/night (עֵיפָה)." The rise of light as a physical reality comes later with the creation of the lights (Gen 1:2). Genesis 1:3–5 is first and foremost about the advent of time, with its regular rhythm of day and night (Beauchamp 1969, 189). After having set up the time rhythm, the creator focuses on the stabilisation of the space.

### Setting up of the Spatial Framework (Days 2 and 3, vv. 6–10)

On the second day, God commands and makes the solid expanse (רַקִּיעַ) in the midst of waters to separate (לְהַבְדִּיל) the waters from waters (לְמִיִּם מִיִּם). Genesis 1:6–8 seem to combine two ancient Near Eastern traditions about the sky material: in one tradition the sky is made of stone whereas in another the sky is formed by waters (Horowitz 1998, 262). While the root רַקִּיעַ refers to a solid material in other biblical texts (Exod 34:3; Isa 42:5), here it is also related to מִיִּם (waters). It is noted that when the concept רַקִּיעַ is

used as a synonym of the plural word שמים (sky) (Gen 1:8), it shares obvious textual form with the word מים (waters).

In her analysis, Van Wolde thinks that the letter -ש of the word שמים (sky) might have been used as an abridged form of the relative pronoun אשר (that), and thereby the word שמים would mean “that relates to מים” (Van Wolde 1998, 24). This would explain why the function of שמים (sky) aims only at separating the “מים-above” from the “מים-below,” since prior to this שמים, there was only unspecified mass of waters called תהום covered by darkness (חשך). The sky realm is not said to be separated, but made (עשה) to perform a separation role of the chaotic waters.

From Genesis 1:9, the lower waters will then receive further ordering to prepare the way for the appearance of היבשה (the dry land) and the sea. The creator’s intention in verses 6–10 consists of transforming the initial diffuse unity into a final existence of four distinct spatial realms—sky, earth, upper waters and lower waters (Van Wolde 2009, 10).

From now, the universe has its tripartite form: the sky, earth and sea although the text deems that the earth’s form is not finalised until the earth (ארץ) bears flora. In this regard, the first triplet of the Priestly creation account ends with earth bearing flora that will serve later as food for animals and humans (Gen 1:29). Given the importance of this point, I offer a specific emphasis on the ecological insights of the active roles of ארץ and מים before continuing with the analysis of other creation days.

### **The Active Ecological Roles of ארץ and מים**

The active role of ארץ and מים is mainly assumed in the rhetoric of God’s commands on the third and fourth days. Both are not commanded as inert or lifeless objects, but subjects with the potential of responding as active agents. In this way, the command ותוצא הארץ דשא (let the earth put forth flora) finds its active voice response דשא (and the earth bears flora) (vv.11–12). Likewise, ארץ is invited to bring forth נפש חיה למינה (many kinds of land animals), including the creeping things and the wild beasts (vv. 24–25).

Most importantly, the flora is generated with a replenishing capacity. The phrase עשב מזורע זרע (plants yielding seed) (v. 11) highlights the fact that the plant species have the capacity to reproduce themselves according to their species (למינהו) by means of seed (זרע) (Cassuto 1961, 41). One could say that ארץ provides the flora realm with the fertility potential similar to the one that God offered to humans and animals (Gen 1:22, 25, 28). The flora yield seed according to their own kind, much as animals and humans bring forth progeny according to their own species (Ramsey 1997, 5). ארץ is then an active agent in the creation process

Likewise, God commanded the waters to produce animals (נפש חיה) (v. 20). Rhetorically, the commands display a verbal precision in which the ארץ and מים are

invited to perform the specific role of producing new things (Brown 1993, 194). It is not evident that also the **תנינם** (beasts) emerged from the sea since they are narrated as a distinct fauna missing in the command (v. 20) and in the fertility blessing that was given to the **נפש חיה** (ordinary fauna) (v. 22). Unlike the ANE myths, the **מים** are not forces of chaos in Gen 1, but mere parts of the cosmos, and God's subordinate agents (Habel 2011, 34). The rise of flying creatures is ambiguous in the MT. The LXX assumes that birds were caused by the seas alongside sea fauna. This supports the thesis that the stem **ברא** refers to the act of separating the great sea beasts (**תנינם**) from the "sea-born" fauna and the flying beings (Gen 1:21).

Therefore, these Priestly verses recognise the creative powers inherent in **ארץ** and **מים**. God only asks them to exercise these powers to generate new life. The action of God does not exclude the partnership of these entities. For this reason, the direct source of flora and fauna is not merely the command of **אלהם**, but **ארץ** and **מים** cooperating with God (Habel 2011, 33). Once separated or ordered by the third day, the text implies that both entities acquired a kind of activation capacity of their inner potential to bring forth life.

#### The Fourth Day and the **משל** Task of the Lights (vv. 14–19)

Until the third day, the creation of order focuses on fixing structures that are intended to be filled by their specific inhabitants in the coming triad of days. Now God makes the planets whose roles will shape and affect life in the world of living beings in terms of light and seasons (time). The rule of the lights forms a parallel with the rule of humans by the sixth day. This day consists of exposing functions that are linked to the making of the lights (**מארת**) as follows:<sup>5</sup>

- A 'to separate (**להבדיל**) the day from the night' (1:14a)
- B 'for (**והיו**) signs, for fixing seasons, for days and years' (1:14b)
- C 'to give light (**להאיר**) on the earth' (1:15)
- D 'to rule (**לממשלת**) the day' (1:16a)
- D' 'to rule (**לממשלת**) the night' (1:16b)
- C' 'to give light (**להאיר**) on the earth' (1:17)
- B' 'to rule (**למשל**) the day and the night' (1:18a)
- A' 'to separate (**ולהבדיל**) the light from the darkness' (1:18b)

The execution of God's command in Genesis 1:14–15 is recorded in reverse order in Genesis 1:16–18. The **משל** (ruling) task of the **מארת** (lights) occupies the centre of the structure (DD') whereas the two panels (ABC and C'B'A') express the goal expected from this function. While the first section (ABC) announces the purpose of the making of the lights, the second panel (C'B'A') states its execution in a permanent way. From this day, "creation turns out to be not only a generation of life, but also an assignment

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5 This chiasmic structure is adapted from the model presented by Ramsey (1997, 8).

of functions by which the created phenomena are related to each other” (Van Wolde 1998, 26).

The ruling function is termed *משל*. Usually, the word is used in relationship with humans and bears the sense of being responsible for something. In this sense, the verb *משל* is used for man’s rule over woman after they had been ousted from Eden in the sense of taking care of her (Gen 3:16; see also Gen 24:2). The *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT)* renders the word *משל* as a synonym for *מלך* with the difference that *משל* focuses more on the function and less on the ruler/person (Gross 1998, 69).

This is actually the sense recorded in Genesis 1:14–18. Obviously, these verses speak much about the function of the rulers of the day and the night (DD’) rather than about the lights. The threefold function expected from the lights consists of separating or ruling day and night, being signs for seasons and time and giving light on earth. Separating or ruling the day and the night refers to the first created thing—time.

The planets do not cause time, but serve the role of separation of day from night, and thereby mark the rotation of these two periods of time. In exercising this role, they simultaneously rule the alternation of daytime and night-time, and then become signs for days, years and seasons, including the Sabbath. In short, the planets enable the forming of the calendar, since marking signs refers to the calculating of times and festivals (Moberly 2009, 46). By regulating day and night, the lights also regulate and even command the life of living beings on *ארץ*.

### Ecological Ambivalence of Day 6 (vv. 24–31)

The main issue of this day relates to the creation of humans in Genesis 1:26–28. In its immediate setting, the footprints of anthropocentrism dominate this literary unit. However, the creation motif of this day involves also land animals and the vegetarian command for both animals and humans.

#### *The structure of Day 6 (Gen 1:24–30)*

- A Earth produces land animals according to their kind (vv. 24–25)
- B Humans made in the *imago Dei* to rule over (*וירדו*) earth and animals (vv. 26–27)
- C God blesses humans with fertility according to their kind (28a)
- C’ God grants them dominion (*כבש*) over earth and animals (*רדה*) (28b)
- B’ Humans to use plants (*עשב*) with seed, and trees (*עץ*) with fruit for food (v. 29)
- A’ Animals to eat plants of the earth (*עשב*) (v. 30)

The sixth day is structured upon the generation of land fauna by the earth, and God’s making of humans in the *imago Dei*. The fertility blessing and human dominion mandate occupy the centre of the day (C). It is clear that land animals are not offered the blessing of fertility, but both *ארץ* and fauna are under the dominion of humans, even though both Adam and animals depend upon *ארץ* for their provision. These issues make the sixth

day very ambivalent and call for a careful ecological reading of the text. Before this exegetical task, the troublesome issues concerning human creation in Genesis 1:26–28 need analysis.

### *The otherness of human beings*

The otherness of humans is suggested by three matters: not only are they made *imago Dei*, but also given dominion over animals (רדה), and the subdual (כבש) of earth. The creation of human beings is a matter of deliberation in a divine council. Like in the ANE, it is within the divine council that important decisions were decreed. In this way, the root נעשה (v. 26) introduces a relevant event in which אלהים and his addressee will be equally involved. God did not consult the court for formality; he needs their approval, participation and cooperation (Garr 2003, 86). For this reason, אלהים inserts an inclusion clause in his speech explaining the rationale and limits of human creation (v. 26b). Although the addressee's answer is not stated, the successful action in Genesis 1:27 assumes that the council agreed on the matter.

Von Rad explains that the divine council aimed at preventing one from referring God's image too directly to God, the Lord. In other words, God included himself among the heavenly beings of his court and thereby concealed himself in the majority (Von Rad 1961, 57). Given the status of human creation, angels or the divine court appear in several texts only when the divine and human worlds meet (Job 1; Isa 6). Still, the divine council uplifts the importance of human creation.

This importance is highlighted by the *imago Dei* attribute. Scholars have given various meanings to the *imago Dei* mentioned in Gen 1:26 ranging from spiritual to kingship allusions. Here is not the place to discuss them all, but see Crouch (2010, 2–9) for such a discussion. What is sure is that, unlike animals, humans are not generated from ארץ. Humans are different as they relate to the divine. The question is how and to what extent they are related to God.

The Hebrew particle כ before the word דמת (כ-דמתנו) invites ideas of similarity and otherness between the likened entities, while the syntax of ב-צלמנו invokes the idea of moving towards a specific realm (Van Wolde 2009, 15). This means that the relationship of humans to God is defined both in terms of approximate and distal (כ), and proximate and intimate (ב), without being identical to God. The idea is that human species share something with God, and yet God located them distant from him on earth with other created species.

The question is whether this particularity of the human species can be interpreted only as a mark of anthropocentrism. Indeed, the divine court and the *imago Dei* status provide humans with a special position in the universe. The text provides humans with special distinctiveness, yet more than the differentiation of the sky from earth, waters from earth, or fauna from flora. However, all (waters, sky, earth, flora, fauna, humans) belong

to the **צבאם** (army) (Gen 2:1) of the created order and must serve the purpose of the cosmic imprimatur: **טוב מאד** (very good) (Gen 1:31).

Genesis 1:1–2:4a does not equalise its characters (**צבאם**), but presents each creature in its uniqueness before connecting them to the whole. Genesis 2:1 qualifies the created subjects as **צבאם** comparing the P creation to the army system (**צבא**). Each single creature has its intrinsic value—**כי־טוב**—and its place, before **אלהים** connects it to the whole system. Some creatures are under the rule of others—whether genuine or harsh power—but still at the service of the **צבא** organisation. This ideal calls for an analysis of the verbs **רדה** and **כבש** expressing the human rule upon animals and earth within the whole system.

*The dominion mandate of humans (v. 28)*

The Hebrew verbs **רדה** (to rule over) and **כבש** (to subdue) denote a harsh rule by the powerful over the weak (Ezek 34:4; Jer 34:11). In Psalm 110:2, the sending (**שלה**) of the king from Zion is associated with the defeat (**רדה**) of his enemies. A similar idea is found in Psalm 72:9 where the king's rule (**רדה**) consist of making his foes lick the dust. It is clear that the expected effects of **רדה** are highly destructive for those affected by such dominion. That is why in Lam 1:13, Yahweh sent fire from above to consume (**רדה**) the city, punishing it, devastating it as if the city was an enemy. Nehemiah 9:28 shows how the Israelites cry that God had abandoned them to their enemies' rule (**רדה**). The verb is extremely violent referring to all kinds of supremacy (Zobel 2004, 331).

Similarly, the root **כבש** is often linked with oppressive and harsh actions, such as subduing slaves (Jer 34:11), conquering the land (Jos 18:1), or the raping of women (Esth 7:9; Neh 5:5). The *TDOT* comments that the verb **כבש** always occurs in the context of oppressive dominion and its connotation implies suppressing the weak, such as:

... in military hostilities, when whole territories and their populations are subdued, in the conquest of established kingdoms, but also in individual cases, when someone is enslaved, or in the sexual realm when a woman or girl is importuned and assaulted. The verb [**כבש**] always presupposes a stronger party as subject and a weaker party as object. (Wagner 1995, 56)

Therefore, both **רדה** and **כבש** naturally convey a violent implication towards the objects of the dominion. Both Hebrew words refer to a dominion against the will of the subordinates, including the use of force. In the immediate context of Genesis 1:26–28, humans are offered a forceful power over the earth and animal kingdom (Towner 2005, 348). This is reiterated in Psalm 8 where everything on earth is put under the human feet.

However, instead of the verbs **רדה** and **כבש**, Psalm 8 uses the root **משל** (v. 6) as if inviting the reader to interpret human rule of Gen 1:28 in reference to the dominion (**משל**) of the lights (Gen 1:16). This semantic alteration implies that the psalmist was

aware of the basic violence denoted by *רדה* and *כבש* whereas the implied goal of the text would be a dominion in the service of the created order. The Psalmist assumption is arguable when one assesses human dominion in relation to the whole structure of the priestly creation account.

### Van Heerden's Assessment of the Dominion Mandate

According to Van Heerden, the dominion mandate should be assessed in reference to the whole framework of the priestly creation account since:

Genesis 1:1–2:4 as geheel skilder met die gebruik van fyn gestruktureerde orde en simmetrie die prentjie van 'n God wie se optrede deur sorgsaamheid en harmonie gekenmerk word. Die sorgvuldig beplande skematiese struktuur van die verhaal suggereer dat daar tog orde onderliggend aan die chaotiese ervaring van die Babiloniese ballingskap is. (Van Heerden 2005, 381)

Genesis 1:1–2:4a is a harmonious whole. In the whole structure, two subjects are juxtaposed in terms of dominion motifs: the lights (fourth day) and humans (sixth day). While the first half of the text (Gen 1:3–19) concludes with the investment of the lights to rule time and light on earth (Gen 1:18), the second half (Gen 1:20–31) moves towards the creation of humans made in order to rule over animals and to subdue the earth (Gen 1:28).

The lights inhabit the sky and humans reside on the earth, and both are expected to sustain order in their respective places. In this sense, the text presents them as a pair in terms of ruling function. While the lights are responsible for ensuring/ruling order in the sky, humans (male and female, *זכר ונקבה*) have power over earth (Gen 1:18 and 27) (Kavusa 2013, 227). This assumption implies that the rule of both the lights and humans refers to the same purpose: maintaining the created order. That is why the dominion of human beings excludes killing animals for food (v. 29).

Dominion is inscribed in the network of interdependency. Van Wolde says it neatly:

This dominion is both relative ... and relational, because it is based on interdependency. As sovereigns of the earth and the animals, people are at the same time dependent on the sun, the air, the waters and the planets of the earth. Dominion and dependency go hand in hand and are actually part of all existent phenomena. A network of created phenomena is therefore built up by these relationships and ... one cannot just read one aspect of the complete network and neglect the other parts. (Van Wolde 1998, 28)

This citation argues for reading Gen 1:26–28 within the Priestly creation account. That is why the MT, contrary to the LXX, does not literally deem the work of the sixth day *כִּי־טוֹב* (good), but included it in the final mark *טוֹב מְאֹד* (very good) for the entire work of the six days (v. 31). The same syntax occurs in the process of division of waters that is not claimed *טוֹב* until the dry land (*יבשה*) appears, that is called *אֶרֶץ*, paired with the

sky (שמים) (vv. 6–11). This should teach us that the text is not solely about the creation of humans, but the created order as a whole functioning network.

Therefore, though רדה and כבש insinuate violent power, humans are however commanded to behave without hostility, violence, abuse or antagonism since animals are excluded from the diet of humans (Gen 1:29). By divine decree, both animals and human beings will share the earth's floral resources (vv. 29–30). The unqualified power of humans over animals and earth is then circumscribed within the vegetarian limit that prevents it from violence.

Furthermore, although sharing something of deity, beings made in God's image differ from God since their spatial dwelling is on earth with other species. Both human beings and animals depend on ארץ for their life, and all are dependent on the ruling task of the lights. The description of humans as rulers of the earth and other living beings is then limited by several boundaries to prevent it from pride and violence against God and the created order.

Genesis 1:1–2:4a is thus not an account of human dominion over any other species, but the panorama of the world as it stands in its vital existence and internal relationship between its distinct units (Van Heerden 2012, 7). The text establishes the principles by which the existence of the universe can be preserved. Although hierarchical, the text offers to every being a place, task and limit in relation to the created order. In this way, creation does not culminate with the creation of humans, but with Sabbath.

### Cosmic Structure of the Seventh Day (Gen 2:1–4a)

The lack of the refrain ערב בקר for this day is probably not a scribal error, but implies that this day is set apart from the preceding six days to celebrate the ordered network. Through the Sabbath, creation “becomes constructed in the *imago tempili*, in the model of a temple” (Brown 2010, 40). The text can be structured as follows:

- A The sky (שמים) and the earth (ארץ) and their host (צבאם) were completed (2:1)
- B And on the seventh day God finished the work he had done (2:2a)
- C And God rested on the seventh day from all the work he had done (2:2b)
- C' God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it (2:3a)
- B' Because God rested from all the work he had done during creation (2:3b)
- A' These are the תלדות of the sky (שמים) and the earth (ארץ) after their ordering (2:4a)

According to this structure, the “seventh day is thus part of creation structure, yet is distinct within it” (Wallace 2000, 50). The process is now complete and Elohim can rest with the creation. AA' not only refers to the end of the ordering process, but also confirms that the focus of the P creation account is not anthropocentric, but cosmic, embracing the ordering and populating of the שמים and ארץ with their hosts (צבאם) as well as the divine rest (שבת). According to Van Heerden (2005), this idea about the seventh day structure of creation is ecologically insightful as he explains below.



*Creation as an ethos of כל-צבאם (Gen 2:1)*

The members of the created order are צבאם (hosts), which refers elsewhere to a cohort or an organised army ready for battle (Josh 5:14–15), astral bodies (Isa 40:26) and the host of the cosmos (Neh 9:6). In military contexts, the verbal root צבא refers to "going to war" (Num 31:7). It is doubtful that the word צבא has, in Genesis 2:1, the warlike sense of viewing the cosmos playing an offensive or defensive function (Beauchamp 1969, 243). The word only denotes the rigorous structure of the cosmos where every member should obey and act according to the rules devoted to its place and function within the ordered universe.

Therefore, the word צבא is here emptied of any association with the language of war. In Genesis 1:1–2:4a, God brought the "hosts" from a chaotic state to a well-ordered and differentiated cosmos, and allots each creature a place and specific task. The idea is that of 2 Maccabees 8:21 where צבא refers to a well-ordained structure of several units acting tactically and separately, but for the same purpose. The opposite of this order is chaos since in a conquered army (צבא), its elements are intermingled and confused: they disperse in the greatest disorder or fight one another (2 Macc 10:32).

*The cosmic significance of Sabbath*

Although the word Sabbath is not in the text, it is implied in the verb שבת (Gen 2:3) and the ceasing of the work on the seventh day. The basic meaning of שבת is "to cease." It does not mean an "end" in the chronological sense, but in the sense of completion or fulfilment inferring that what was projected or expected has been secured (Browning 2010, 30). The absence of the refrain morning and evening is certainly not a scribal error, but an indication that this is not a day that follows the others: it celebrates and embraces them.

In this sense, the word שבת infers "holiday," the day of celebration after active work. This complies with the scholarly debate on the origin of Sabbath. Probably Sabbath finds its source in the celebrations of the rhythms and cycles of the moon upon which the fertility or ארץ abundance were deemed to depend (Albertz 1994, 408).

The Priestly writer possibly replaced this honouring of nature with the praise of אלהים who was its maker. That is why 2 Chronicles 36:20–21 interprets the Babylonian exile as a time of Sabbath (rest) not only for the land of Canaan, but also of its people in which they have experienced rejuvenation for a new beginning (Jonker 2007, 704). That is why the word בהבראם for the crowning of the created order (Gen 2:4a) clearly points back to the opening verse of the account (Gen 1:1).

The presence of the verb ברא in the word בהבראם of the closing verse (Gen 2:4a) implies a new beginning for the ordered cosmos. The beginning is not that of chaos as in Gen 1:1–2, but of order and network of the members (צבאם). The syntax ויכל אלהים מכלי-מלאכתו (God finished all his work, Gen 2:2a) is also used for the completion of the

tabernacle: *ויכל משה את־המלאכה* (Moses finished the work, Exod 40:33) conveying the adequate result of the building task.

That is why the Sabbath motif (CC') holds the centre of the structure of the day. By blessing it and hallowing (setting apart) it, God invested the seventh day with a power similar to the fecundity given to living beings (Habel 2011, 41). This is implied in the word *תלדות* (from the verb *ילד*, Gen 2:4a,) that is usually used for the procreation of human life (Gen 5:1–2a). The seventh day provides the created order the ideal of sustainability within its structures, namely the renewal potential, the power to stimulate, animate, enrich and give fullness to life through rest (Westermann 1984, 172). We can surely conclude that by the seventh day, *אלהים* deemed the created order ready for producing and sustaining order.

By including the earth, flora and fauna in the perspective of Sabbath, the P creation account rejects all utilitarian views that would consider these entities as mere objects, but subjects of celebrations. The world has been brought forth by the Creator in the act of creation, and returns to him in the act of worship on Sabbath (Barton 1996, 124). In this way, the P writer will later insert that every seventh year all agricultural activity should stop in order to enable the land to observe the Sabbath for Yahweh (Lev 25:1–7).

Sabbath is a celebration of creation's integrity in its completed unity and diversity. It is the celebration of beauty and purpose of all forms of existence in their allotted place in the created order. Sabbath celebrates the created order and the interdependences within the created network.

### *Creation as a temple*

In concluding the work with Sabbath, the priestly writer confirms his vision of creation as a sacred ethos. This association between temple and creation is not unique to the Hebrew Bible. Temples in the ancient Near East often had cosmological inferences. An illustration is given in the Sumerian Gudea Cylinders which display similarities with Genesis 1. Scholars listed many parallels between Genesis 1 and this text, ranging from a seven-day dedication of the temple, the association of temple building to kinship, temple building being connected with fertility, pronouncement of blessing on the temple, a formal statement of the completion of the temple and vivid depictions of the temple (Morrow 2020, 7).

In the ancient Near East, temples were built so that gods could rest in them. Rest does not infer disengagement, but a sign that everything is in place, stable and secure and life and the cosmos may function as intended (Walton 2010, 3). Genesis hints at the idea of stability and functionality achieved through the creation of an order where everything in the cosmos has its counterpart (Van Heerden 2014, 561). Even those who have been assigned dominion over earth have their counterparts in the sky: the lights that rule the day and the night.

Most of these counterparts exist due to the act of separation (בדל), a term which is often associated with priestly duties in the temple (cf. Lev 10:10; 11:47; 20:25; Ezek 22:26). In fact, in the ancient Near East and in the Bible the cosmos was understood to be a gigantic temple (Isa 66:1), and temples were designed to be a micro-cosmos (see the description of the Garden of Eden and the temple vision of Ezekiel) (Van Heerden 2014, 561). There is a rich symbolism in the tabernacle/temple furniture and that of Genesis 1.

However, Van Dyk conveyed that the link between cosmos and temple should not be meant only as symbolic, but in terms of a magico-mythical worldview. He explained that myths presume magical relationships existing between the heavens and earth and between magically connected phenomena on earth (Van Dyk 2005, 868). His arguments reinforce the idea of human fate as being ontologically linked to the story or life of the cosmos.

## Conclusion

Genesis 1 shows that its focus is not the uniqueness of human beings, but the created order. Humans are indeed special creatures, but they are at the same time set in interdependence with other hosts in the building process of the cosmic temple. With creation as a temple, it ends in God's rest (Sabbath); and thus, all of creation is associated with God (Van Heerden 2014, 562). In this way, whatever human dominion might mean, it has to treat creation with respect as a sacred arena, and to be committed to its continuing transformation and renewal.

Creation climaxes not with human supremacy or dominion, but with Sabbath. This means that it is not human dominion that is important, but life celebration of the whole created order as God deemed it "very good" (Gen 1:31). In this way, creation is an inner integrity of order securing the wellbeing of humans and nonhuman beings. The wellbeing of every individual is completely bound up with the wellbeing of the whole created order.

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