

Biblical Concept of Stewardship as Portrayed in the Creation Narrative

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Abstract: This paper explores the concept of stewardship as portrayed in the biblical creation narrative and its relevance to the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of stewardship. The study aims to analyze key perspectives of the creation narrative and examines the actions, attitudes and outcomes based on these narratives. The paper adopts a qualitative approach by identifying and analyzing relevant passages from the creation narrative, comparing them with the traditional Adventist teaching on stewardship. The study finds that the concept of stewardship in the creation narrative encompasses not only the responsible management of resources but also the development and sustainable utilization of those resources. It highlights the importance of productivity, protectivity, community involvement and sustainability. Moreover, it emphasizes the dual aspects of growth and increase and the need for a balanced approach that considers both quantitative and qualitative changes over time. Based on these findings, the study concludes that stewardship is a fundamental concept in the biblical narrative, providing a framework for humans to understand their purpose and responsibility in relation to the Creator and the natural world. The study recommends the emphasis of the holistic approach to stewardship that encompasses not only the mobilization of financial resources but also the protection of the environment and the promotion of sustainable practices. This approach aligns with the mission of the church to make disciples and proclaim the gospel while ensuring the well-being of both present and future generations.

Keywords: Creation; stewardship; productivity; protectivity; community involvement; sustainability.

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Introduction

In many ways, Adventist theological perspectives of Stewardship have centered on the management of resources and by extension wise utilization of talents and gifts. Genesis. 2:15 seems to extend the concept to production and development of the same resources. Therefore, the command to work the Garden of Eden implies the productive aspect of stewardship. It suggests that humans are not passive recipients of resources but active participants. This implies that stewardship involves man's utilizing the resources available to his or her full potential, whether it be cultivating the land, harnessing natural resources or engaging in sustainable practices. Church members are therefore encouraged to view themselves as

stewards of resources entrusted to them by God (Reid, 2019) and to use the resources in a way that glorifies God and furthers the mission of God. This study sought to explore the biblical concept of stewardship as portrayed in the creation narrative.

Stewardship and Mission of the Church

Money, talents and gifts support the Seventh-day Adventist Church mission. The church relies on the generosity and commitment of its members to support its operations. In this way, the church is able to make a positive impact on the lives of individuals and the surrounding communities (See Gen. 1:26-28; 2:15; 1 Chron. 29:14; Haggai 1:3-11; Mal. 3:8-12; Matt. 23:23; Rom. 15:26, 27; 1 Cor. 9:9-14; 2 Cor. 8:1-15; 9:7). The church's Mission is to

make disciples of Jesus Christ who live as His loving witnesses and proclaim to other people the everlasting gospel of the Three Angels' Messages in preparation for His soon return (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Rev 14:6-12). Adventists believe that the Three Angels' Message is a call for people to prepare for the return of Jesus Christ, urging them to embrace true worship, reject religious deceptions and remain faithful to God's commandments amidst the challenges and trials of the last days. It is an urgent message of hope and salvation for all. The need to meet this mission necessitates the deployment of resources in terms of talents, gifts and finances from members. Therefore, the Adventist church uses the concept of "systematic benevolence" which refers to the practice of systematically and regularly giving for supporting the work of God. Adventists emphasize the importance of being good stewards of the resources entrusted by God. The Adventist concept of Stewardship, therefore, emphasizes on members' diligence in managing their own resources and setting aside a portion to support the mission.

The duality of productivity and Protectivity

Stewardship is as old as humanity. At creation, man was charged to be productive (Gen. 1:28) – be 'fruitful' [parah] and 'multiply' [rabah]). The same verse also charges man to replenish the earth and to subdue it [kabash, both words' meaning having responsibility over the earth, more particularly to protect it. Rodriguez (1994) stated that the biblical understanding of stewardship is an attempt to clarify the concept of *purpose* in our lives and provide a 'self-understanding' based on a personal relationship with the Creator. Adam's purpose was to work with the Creator in the administration of the garden (and by extension the planet).

From the Old Testament perspective, Stewardship is, therefore, the careful and responsible management of resources entrusted to individuals, with the ultimate goal of using them to fulfill a specific purpose or mission. God placed Adam in the garden with two distinct instructions – to 'dress it' [*abad*] it and to 'keep it' [*shamar*] (Gen. 2:15). Strong (1990) described [*abad*] as to *work* by implication, *to serve, to till, to do, to dress to execute in the sense of a husbandman, to keep, to labor, to bring to pass and to serve*. This implies the duty of care placed upon Adam to develop the garden and thereby increase the resources contained therein. On the other hand, the concept

of [*shamar*] implies to hedge about (as with thorns), i.e. guard; generally, to protect, to attend, to be circumspect, to take heed (to self), to keep, (self), to mark, to look narrowly, to observe, to preserve, to regard, to reserve, to save (self), to wait (for) and to watch. In a sense, the concept of [*shamar*] places the responsibility to protect resources. Both words used together are the foundations for Stewardship.

Stewardship and Community

McDowell (2009) describes work as 'all of our productive daily activities. The author expands the biblical view of productivity as a collective effort. God provided Adam with a wife as helper (Gen. 2:18) with the intention of expounding Adam's productivity to meet the mandate. Community, in a biblical context, refers to a group of individuals who share common values and responsibilities and those who care for one another. The Bible emphasizes the importance of living in community and supporting one another in love (Acts 2:42-47, Galatians 6:2). God calls Christians to be part of a larger community that reflects God's love and extends care and compassion to all. Stewardship involves recognizing that all resources, including time, talents and material possessions are gifts from God. As stewards, God called people to utilize resources not only for our personal benefit but also for the well-being of others. This includes supporting and serving our communities, meeting the needs of the poor and the marginalized and practicing acts of kindness and generosity (Luke 10:25-37; Gal. 6:10).

Be Fruitful and Multiply

Farmer et al (ed.) (2021) describes *Productivity* as involving maximizing output and efficiency, achieving goals and making progress toward desired outcomes. God expected Adam to maximize his output in the garden. God instructed the couple to be fruitful, to multiply, to replenish the earth, to subdue it and to have dominion over the earth (Gen. 2:18). The command to be fruitful in Genesis 1 encompasses physical reproduction, the establishment of relationships and families and the cultivation of spiritual and moral fruitfulness. It speaks to God's design for human flourishing in various dimensions of life, including the biological, social and spiritual aspects.

Be 'fruitful' [parah] was an instruction from the Creator to Adam to multiply. Strong (1990) defines the term as to bear fruits (literally or figuratively) - bear, bring forth (fruit), be, cause to be, make fruitful, grow, increase (Strong, 1990). Strong's

Concordance assigns numbers to words in the Hebrew or Greek Bible Lexicon – H6509 corresponds with the word PARAH. If you Google that same number you will get the same result. Each original-language word (Hebrew or Greek) is given an entry number in the dictionary of those original language words listed in the back of the concordance. These have become known as the "Strong's numbers." This allows the user of the concordance to look up the meaning of the original language word in the associated dictionary in the back, thereby showing how the original language word was translated into the English word in the KJV Bible). Adam was to grow and increase that which the Creator had given him. Anton (2007, p. 259) stated that stewardship demands the increment of whatever one has been entrusted with. He continues to say, "Good stewardship requires increase and development of whatever God has entrusted, whatever it be, talent, time or treasure."

Anton's view that stewardship requires "increase" and "development" mirrors the second instruction to 'multiply' [rabah] which implies to increase, abundance, bring up, continue, enlarge, exceed, increase, more (in number), yield much and multiply... (Strong, 1990). Here again, there is a fundamental duality between growth and increase which can be understood in terms of their similarities and differences. Both growth and increase imply a *quantitative* change, but they differ in their *qualitative* nature. Growth refers to a *qualitative* change in which something develops (in size or stature), matures over time, involving an increase in complexity, sophistication and functionality. For instance, a plant can grow in height and in complexity with the increase of its leaves, stems, fruits, flowers and even roots. Stewardship would then involve all the actions of making this possible. On the other hand, *increase* or *multiplication* refers to a *quantitative* change in which there is a notable expansion or enlargement of a particular attribute or characteristic, which is an accumulation or addition of something without necessarily involving any qualitative changes. For example, an increase in population size can refer to a simple numerical expansion without necessarily implying any improvement in the quality of items. For instance, one cob of maize may produce 100 seeds, which will then produce 100 plants that will have 10,000 seeds.

The duality between growth and increase highlights the importance of considering both quantitative and

qualitative changes when evaluating the concept of stewardship. While the increase in size or quantity is important, it is equally important to consider qualitative changes that occur as a system or organism grows and develops. Capra and Luigi (2014) suggested that the systemic understanding of growth implies a sense of multifaceted unfolding of living organisms, ecosystems or human communities moving toward reaching their full potentials. Man cannot achieve this without being careful not to hurt the very ecosystem that supports the growth.

Stewardship and Sustainability

The instruction to the first couple in Genesis 1:28 to be fruitful [parah], multiply [rabah], replenish [male'] the earth and subdue it [kabash] implies that the Creator intended the stewardship of resources to involve sustainable development of the resources. Man is required to replenish the earth. The idea of replenishing the earth implies that Adam and Eve were to multiply and fill the earth with their descendants. It signifies God's desire for people to populate the land. It emphasizes the command for Adam and Eve to procreate and establish generations that would inhabit the earth. The idea of replenishing the earth involves sustainability and responsible use of natural resources. It implies the need to *restore* and *maintain* the health and balance of the environment and ensuring proper use of natural resources. The focus of the verse is not just on the command for humans to procreate and populate the earth, but also to exercise responsible stewardship over the natural world under God's authority.

Replenishing the earth is a key instruction where God gives the task of stewardship over the earth with the responsibility to care for and to cultivate it. Environmentalists and sustainability advocates have built on this idea with the aim of ensuring nature does not suffer from human activities. Portney (2015) argued that it is crucial to adopt a long-term perspective and consider the impact of human activities on the environment, particularly in Agriculture, which is the primary method with which humanity finds food. He argues that sustainability in the context of Agriculture shifts the focus from working tirelessly to grow more and more of crops, to working to ensure that the land is able to produce a certain amount of a crop indefinitely. Sustainability and productivity often come into conflict when efforts to maximize crop yields in the short run often leads to practices that threaten the ability of the land to produce.

Aside from agriculture, the concept of replenishing the earth involves several key principles, including waste reduction, conserving natural resources and adopting sustainable practices during the exploitation of resources (Masouras et al. 2023). Earthly resources are finite. This therefore calls for judicious usage of resources in a manner that does not hurt the earth. This includes efforts to reduce carbon emissions, to promote renewable energy sources and to protect biodiversity all of which requires the application of deliberate human effort to ensure the same (Portney, 2015). It also involves taking the necessary steps to ensure that resources are used in a responsible way in order to benefit both present and future generations. The idea of replenishing the earth emphasizes the importance of adopting a sustainable approach to environmental management and it recognizes the need for responsible stewardship of natural resources. It highlights the importance of balancing economic growth with environmental protection and underscores the idea that it is possible to achieve sustainable development while ensuring the health and well-being of both people and the planet.

Subdue and Dominate

The instruction also extends to mean to subdue [kabash], *to conquer, to subjugate and to bring into subjection* (Strong, 1990). Used positively, the word implies taming the wild, reaching out to new frontiers or horizons and extending the borders of one's abilities. The idea of reaching out to new horizons is interpreted in various ways, but generally, it refers to the exploration and expansion of human knowledge, experience and influence beyond existing boundaries. It involves a spirit of adventure, curiosity and a willingness to take risks in pursuit of new opportunities.

From a historical perspective, humankind has been exploring new horizons, whether it was the discovery of new lands, the exploration of oceans or the conquest of space. This drive to expand and explore has led to the development of new technologies, the exchange of cultures and the advancement of human knowledge and understanding.

Today, the idea of reaching out to new horizons continues to inspire people in various fields, including science, technology, business and the arts. For example, space exploration and the quest to colonize other planets represent one of the most

ambitious and exciting frontiers for humankind. The development of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing, offers new possibilities for advancing human knowledge and understanding. The idea of reaching out to new horizons quickly raises questions and concerns about the impact of human activities on the environment, social and economic inequalities and ethical considerations. It is therefore important for humankind approaching the expansion of new horizons in a responsible and sustainable way, considering the impact on humans and the planet.

Finally, the Creator gives the man one more instruction - to have dominion [radah] over the earth. The idea of dominion implies to *tread down, i.e. subjugate, prevail against, reign, rule over, take* (Strong, 1990). The concept of dominion over the earth refers to the idea that humans have been given a position of authority and responsibility over the natural world. God gave Man authority over the earth and all living things and this was a mandate to use the earth's resources for human benefit and by extension responsibility and a duty of care for the environment. While one might interpret the mandate as a justification for the exploitation of natural resources for human benefit, it still requires man to use the earthly resources responsibly and sustainably.

We need to interpret the concept of dominion over the earth in the context of environmental ethics and sustainability. Environmental ethics examines the moral and ethical dimensions of human interactions with the natural environment (Stenmark, 2002). It explores questions of right, wrong, moral responsibility and the ethical implications of human actions on the environment. Environmental ethics seeks to understand the value and intrinsic worth of the environment and its living beings as well as the moral obligations humans have towards them. A narrow interpretation of dominion has led to the exploitation and destruction of natural resources, leading to habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation. Calizza et al. (2017) studied and reported on the impact of habitat degradation, which has led to the loss of reduction of biodiversity and species abundance on Earth. There is, therefore, the need for a more holistic and responsible approach to ensure the long-term health and well-being of the planet.

The concept of dominion over the earth raises important questions about the relationship between

humans and the natural world and the responsibilities and obligations that come with that relationship (Westra et al., 2016). It underscores the importance of balancing human needs and desires with the need to protect and preserve the natural environment for future generations.

Man as a Co-worker with the Creator

Man is called to work with the Creator as a steward. White (2000) states that God created Adam as his co-worker in tending the garden and, therefore, multiplying it. In Christ's parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:5) in which a man traveling to a far country, entrusted his talents to three of his servants, the man highly commends the two who increased their talents and heavily castigates the 'unprofitable servant' (Matt. 25:30) who did not increase their talent. This parable, therefore, emphasizes Adam's expectation at Creation, the aspect of productivity.

An important expectation of Adam's role was to protect that which he had produced. Schmutzer (2023) states that in Christ, people may truly work together as God intended when he made Eve and Adam as co-workers. This means that all the good things placed on earth were an expression of God's love for man and man's part was to take care of these things, as an expression of his love for God. Protectivity involves avoiding negative outcomes, minimizing risks and ensuring safety and security. Essentially, the fall of Adam is mirrored by his failure on this exact requirement. Adam was under strict instructions to avoid the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:9; Gen 2.17) and so failure to heed this instruction describes the fall of man. Stewardship, therefore, involves careful understanding and following God's instructions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The concept of stewardship in the Old Testament refers to the idea that humans were entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of the world that God created. In Genesis, God gives Adam and Eve dominion over the earth and all its living creatures, which is a mandate to be responsible stewards of the natural world. He also charges them to work the garden. In conclusion, the biblical concept of stewardship as portrayed in the creation narrative emphasizes the responsibility of humans to actively engage in the productive and protective management of the Earth's resources. It involves not only the wise utilization and development of resources but also the importance of community

involvement, productivity, protectivity, and sustainability.

The concept of stewardship calls for a balanced approach that considers both quantitative and qualitative changes over time, ensuring the well-being of present and future generations. The concept of stewardship is further associated with the idea of tithing, which involves giving one tenth of one's income or resources back to God as an act of obedience and gratitude.

The Old Testament further emphasizes the importance of caring for the poor and vulnerable members of society as a part of stewardship. The Book of Deuteronomy instructed the Israelites to leave the edges of their fields unharvested so that the poor and the foreigners can gather food for themselves. The concept of stewardship is linked to the idea of justice and righteousness. In the prophetic books, the prophets condemned the Israelites for their failure to uphold their responsibilities as stewards of the land and their mistreatment of the poor and marginalized members of society. Other than giving back to God, Stewardship in the Old Testament emphasized the importance of taking care of the natural world and using our resources wisely and justly.

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