

Imago Dei and ecology: Rereading Genesis 1:26–28 from the perspective of Toba Batak in the ecological struggle in Tapanuli, Indonesia

**Authors:**

Andar G. Pasaribu¹ 
 Roy C.H.P. Sipahutar² 
 Eduward H. Hutabarat¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Christian Religion Education, Tarutung State Christian Institute, Tarutung, Indonesia

²Faculty of Theology, Jakarta Theological Seminary, Jakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding author:

Andar Pasaribu,
 andargunawanpasaribu@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 20 June 2022
 Accepted: 15 Aug. 2022
 Published: 15 Sept. 2022

How to cite this article:

Pasaribu, A.G., Sipahutar, R.C.H.P. & Hutabarat, E.H., 2022, '*Imago Dei* and ecology: Rereading Genesis 1:26–28 from the perspective of Toba Batak in the ecological struggle in Tapanuli, Indonesia', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43(1), a2620. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2620>

Copyright:

© 2022. The Authors.
 Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article departed from the ecological problems that are currently happening in Tapanuli, the area around Lake Toba, North Sumatra province, Indonesia. In addition to the lack of environmental awareness of the local community, and the presence of companies that are not environmentally friendly, another factor that causes ecological problems in Tapanuli is the attribution of *imago Dei* to humans, and this forms a paradigm that humans are the rulers of nature. Therefore, a new meaning of *imago Dei* is needed that allows nature to have the right to be sustainable. The comparison between Toba Batak traditional religion and Christian theology creates a good interplay to develop a contextual ethical theology that can be adapted for other environmental discussions. This study used a biblical-cultural approach, namely rereading Genesis 1:26–28 from the perspective of Toba Batak anthropology, to get the novelty of the idea of *imago Dei*. The result of rereading Genesis 1:26–28 generated new ideas. Not only humans but every creature is a representation of Mulajadi Nabolon (the High God of Toba Batak). All creation is the *imago Dei*.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article contributes to the interdisciplinary conversation between biblical, systematic and cultural theology to give new meaning to the conception of *imago Dei*. The rereading of Genesis 1:26–28 is carried out using the anthropological perspective of Toba Batak. The results are certainly very useful for forming a contextual ecological paradigm for the Toba Batak people in Tapanuli, Indonesia.

Keywords: *Imago Dei*; Genesis 1:26–28; ecology; Tapanuli; Toba Batak.

Introduction

In the discussion of Old Testament themes, the theme of creation has a special place, of course, in addition to other themes, especially the theme of redemption (see Sipahutar 2020). One subject of theological investigation in the theme of creation that has received the attention of Christian theologians for two millennia, whether it be Biblical or Systematic theologians, is *imago Dei* (the proposition of humankind as the image of God). If we look closely, the conversation on the topic of *imago Dei* in the early Christian period until the Middle Ages tends to revolve around the structural dogmatic formulation of Christian anthropology. Some theologians of the period proposed the anthropological idea of a trichotomy of human structure, but it seems that many more theologians supported the dichotomous view (Anderson 2004:84; Hadiwijono 2012:75; Sopater 2011:45). *Imago Dei* is always associated with the topic of soteriology and eschatology as the ideal to be achieved in Jesus' work of redemption (Gramont 2005:103; McFadyen 2012:919). The good news is that in the last two centuries, there has been a shift in the theologians' focus on the topic of *imago Dei*. Contemporary theologians are beginning to realise that theological anthropology must discuss broader things about humans so that the discussion that is put forward is more related to relational humanism.

Human existence can be approached not only dogmatically but from the side of humanism. For example, the theologian Joan R. Harrell used the *imago Dei* as the basis of his argument against the equality of women in the liturgical ministry of the church (Harrell 2008:15–24). However, an increasingly strong emphasis on relational humanism can also be a threat to human relations with other creatures, it can develop into androcentrism. Whereas in reality, humans in the 21st century have more complex challenges. Humans are not just related to other humans. Apart from having to respond to the rapid advancement of technology, humans must also be aware of the reality of their eternal relationship with nature, which must be maintained diligently. This fact was questioned and answered well by Nadia Marais. Marais embraced the *imago Dei* conception

offered by Wentzel van Huyssteen and David Kelsey to conclude that humans are a reflection of God as well as a prism that reflects God's light in their activities and relationships with other creatures (Marais 2021:1–8). It is just that, over time, we observe that human relations, especially with nature, are increasingly strained.

Imago Dei's interpretation of androcentrism has encouraged people to think that humans are the centre of God's creative purpose at the time of creation. Humans are attributed as the crown of creation. This dogmatic view positions the rest of creation as if it was deliberately presented to fulfil human needs; it is therefore so that throughout the history of the world it is undeniable that there has been such cruel exploitation of nature to fulfil the needs of the crown of creation (see Eichrodt 1960:127; Wolff 1974:160). Making humans the centre of creation has a grim impact on the integrity of creation. Ecological unfriendliness is becoming something that is commonly seen in many parts of the world.

Ecological damage threatens the life of all, not only plants and animals but also human life itself. The damage occurred in many places, including Tapanuli (the area around Lake Toba, Batak Land), North Sumatra, Indonesia. Tapanuli is being persecuted and crying. Tapanuli's forest and its ecosystem are disturbed (see Lukman et al. 2021; Saragih & Sunito 2001; Silaban & Silalahi 2021; Sundari & Kintamani 2021). Lake Toba is polluted, and the discharge has approached the minimum level.¹ It must be acknowledged that the local community has played an undeniable role in the destruction of nature. Deforestation for food and shelter is still being carried out.² Likewise, the domestic waste of residents living around Lake Toba flows unhindered into the lake without adequate treatment. However, it must also be understood that the contribution of the local community is only a small part of the many other factors that cause damage although they must be made aware of their role (Irwandi, Rosid & Mart 2021). The biggest contributor to ecological damage is the presence of large-cap companies that are not environmentally friendly. The Church Council in Indonesia (CCI) has urged the government to immediately close the multinational company operating in Tapanuli, which is considered the biggest contributor to ecological damage in the Tapanuli area (Hutasoit 2021). The current capitalism that has come with the beautiful promise of bringing prosperity to Tapanuli has exploited and damaged

nature, which should also have the right to live on an equal footing with humans.

For this reason, a cultural-theological construction is needed that can mobilise common awareness for the realisation of restoration and ecological justice in Tapanuli. One of the efforts that can be made is by interpreting *imago Dei*, which considers the text and context, to form an adequate understanding of the relationship and responsibility of humans to nature, especially in Tapanuli. It is possible to use the struggle with people's lives and the identity of the interpreter as a perspective on interpreting the Scriptures (see De Wet Oosthuizen 2022). We found out that the text of Genesis 1:26–28 has a noble message of concern for ecology, especially when it is read with a postcolonial paradigm based on Toba Batak cosmology, which is rooted in agrarian life. Of course, this article also draws on the tradition of Christian thought (interpretation) of the text while providing some critical analysis of these ideas. The result of rereading Genesis 1:26–28 is expected to be able to answer the struggles of the Batak Land (Tapanuli), which is suffering from ecological damage.

***Imago Dei* is not the crown of creation**

The order of creation, which is stated in the narrative of the Priestly Source (P) (Gn 1:1–2:4a), is plurally interpreted as a stage of perfection of creation. The event of the creation of man (Gn 1:26–27), which is placed on the order of the last (sixth) of the six days of God's creative work, before he rested on the seventh day, is considered by the interpreters of the Old Testament as not without a special message. From the first to the third day, God designed and prepared natural objects as the necessary means for the presence of living things in the next creation. Then, until the sixth day, the plants and animals are fully presented. Humans are created after everything else. Umberto Cassuto concluded this act of God as a sign that humans were in control of the creation that had previously been formed and presented on earth (Cassuto 1978:53–54). Humans are the pinnacle of God's work (Towner 2005:344). Humans are considered the crown of creation.

Walter Brueggemann (1982), an Old Testament theologian, corroborates this view through his literary critical analysis. According to him, there was a marked change in the narrative and poetic form of the text between before and after the creation of humans. Before creating humans, the verb used was 'to create' (Heb *bārā*) while God used a special verb to create human, namely 'to make' (Heb *āsā*) (Gn 1:26). This shows that God had a special focus on the creation of human (Brueggemann 1982:31). After that, of all creation that has existed, God's blessings and commands were given only to humans (Gn 1:28). According to Brueggemann, this passage indicates that creation has a special intimacy with the Creator. Humans are the crown of creation to which God has made a strong commitment (Brueggemann 1982:31–32).

1. A study has been conducted to determine nutrient and organic load levels entering the lake represented by total phosphorus (TP) and chemical oxygen demand (COD). Based on COD and government regulation number 82/2001, water quality at the lake inlets was class III and IV. In the lake area, the water class in non-cage aquaculture (NCA) was III, while in cage aquaculture (CA) the water class tends to be III and IV. The estimated TP loading from the catchment area was 138 tonnes/year, while that from cage aquaculture activity was 570.33 tonnes/year. Pollutants have caused the worsening of water class, increasing water column anoxia in the hypolimnion layer and eutrophication in Lake Toba (Lukman 2021:930). Another study that has been carried out shows a downward trend in the water level of Lake Toba, with an average decline of 2.4 cm per year for six decades (Irwandi 2021:4).

2. Deforestation has been resulting in soil erosion that flows into Lake Toba through the river system. In 2001, of 1406 km² of land officially classified as forest, only 25% was forested (Saragih & Sunito 2001:247–248). It is currently known that there are also endemic and endangered species in the vicinity of Lake Toba area with 28 species from 6 genera (Balsaminaceae, Begoniaceae, Ericaceae, Gesneriaceae, Nepenthaceae, Orchidaceae) (Sundari & Kintamani 2021).

Two criticisms can be put forward on the theological construction above. Firstly, the thesis that is built on the chronological basis of creation is very likely to be debated again. Even if the order of the day of creation is used as the basis for legitimising the position of humans as the 'crown of creation' because they are creations in the final phase, it seems that this assumption can be said to be a mistake. If the whole narrative is read carefully, God's act of creation did not just stop on the sixth day but continued on the seventh day. Even if in the narrative it is written '... so on the seventh day he rested ...' (Gn 2:2/NIV), it does not mean that God did nothing else on the day mentioned. On the seventh day, God performed an equally important act, namely the sanctification of that day (Gn 2:3). The Jewish interpretation regards the act of keeping the seventh day as establishing the specialty of the Sabbath (Sarna 1989:14). If you follow the principle of the order of the days of creation to refer to who is the 'crown of creation', then the act of sanctifying the day is the true 'crown of creation', not humans.

Jürgen Moltmann even mentions that the Sabbath is a feast. On the Sabbath, all creation rejoices, not only humans (Moltmann 1985:276–77). Thus, life must be understood as a fellowship. Each element in it becomes meaningful if it has a relationship with other elements. The joy of life is not only a human right, but the essence of all creation that observes the Sabbath. So, with that, the essence of Sabbath observance is the maintenance of the harmonious life of all of God's creation.

Secondly, the meaning based on the literary criticism approach developed in the West is not always relevant in responding to the challenges of the Indonesian context, in particular Tapanuli. For the context of Tapanuli, it is necessary to investigate how the Toba Batak view defines *imago Dei* as the peak of creation based on the cosmology of its creation. Toba Batak interprets creation as a continuous process in which every aspect complements each other. Mulajadi Nabolon (the High God of Toba Batak) gave a mandate to Borudeakparujar (a woman hero of heaven) to work for the earth so that life would be possible to exist on it. In the Creation mythology, which is a tradition orally among the Toba Batak people, as well as in the various versions that have been written, there is absolutely no division of the day of creation. Thus, the creation of the universe chronologically does not have a peak that can give birth to interpretations, so certain elements can be called the crown of creation. Raja Monang Naipospos³ stated that no one element should be considered more important than another when Debata Mulajadi Nabolon initiated and realised the creation of the earth and life in it. Likewise, man is not an incarnation of God (Debata Mulajadi Nabolon), so humans should not be considered to have a higher degree than other creations (Naipospos, pers. comm., 25 April 2022). Humans are not the crown of creation.

The verb *bārā* becomes *āsā* when the creation of humans as a symbol of the privilege of God's relationship with humans, as

3. Raja Monang Naipospos is a Toba Batak culturalist, he is the king of Parmalim (Toba Batak traditional religion).

offered by Brueggemann, seems to be different from what is offered in the Toba Batak Creation narrative. '*Debata Mulajadi Nabolon does sitompa saluhut ...*' ['Mulajadi Nabolon is the one who created everything ...'], such as the initial formulation of the Toba Batak Creation narrative.⁴ The use of the word *sitompa* (comes from the root 'toppa', which means 'creating') is used in general for the whole process of creation, but humans are not said to be *ditompa* [created] because they were *ditubuhon* [born] by Borudeakparujar. Even if there is a special terminology that is raised in the process of creation that distinguishes it from other creations, namely the emergence of the word *ditopa* [forged], not *tompa* [created]. The word 'ditopa' was used when Borudeakparujar was mandated to form and cultivate the land.⁵ By Borudeakparujar, the land was forged (*ditopa*) with sincerity and hard work to make a place for the life that would live on it.

Are humans an *imago Dei* in the Toba Batak perspective? The following is an excerpt of the narrative of the creation of humans in the Toba Batak:

Dung i saut ma pardongansaripeonnasida di tano on ... gabegabean ma Borudeakparujar ... tubu ma na dibortian na i alai songon gumulgumul do. Ndang adong tanganna dohot uluna ... nunga pintor mate. Dung i didok Mulajadi Nabolon ma: 'Ndang pola dia i, ditanom ma i ... marpuntar ma i ...' Dung i di laonlaon ni ari ... tubu ma anakonna dua ... sada baa, sada boru. Ia goar ni baa i, i ma Raja Ihatmanisia, Tuan Mulana ... Ia goar boru-boru i, i ma Boru Itammanisia, ina ni jolma manisia ... (After that they were married on earth ... Borudeakparujar was pregnant ... so the fetus she was carrying was born like a bun. She had no hands and head ... and she died immediately ... Then Mulajadi Nabolon said: 'Don't worry, just bury it ... it will break on the ground ...' After a long time ... Borudeakparujar gave birth to two twins ... one boy and one girl. The boy was named Raja Ihatmanisia, Early Man ... while the girl, named Boru Itammanisia, was the mother of humans ...). (Hutagalung 1991:27)

Even though humans are the result of a marriage between the celestial heroine named Borudeakparujar with another heavenly creature named Si Raja Odapodap on earth, humans are not heavenly creatures. Humans are born as the fruit of Borudeakparujar's regret for her stubbornness when she used to oppose the orders of Debata Mulajadi Nabolon. Thus, humans in Toba Batak anthropology are an eternal sign of Borudeakparujar's regret and the embodiment of forgiveness from Debata Mulajadi Nabolon. The cycle of regret and forgiveness will always exist as long as this earth exists, between God and humans or humans and humans (Naipospos, pers. comm., 20 May 2022).

That way, the element of the immanence of God in the form of forgiveness, will always exist in humans. Ramot Samosir⁶

4. As stated by Raja Monang Naipospos. All versions of the Creation narrative use the word *manompa* [to create], except Hutagalung that uses *manjadihon*, which means also 'to create' (Hutagalung 1991:6).

5. 'Songon i ma sai didatdati Si Boru Deang Parujar ma manopa tano i, asa tung mansai bidang' ('That's how Si Boru Deang Parujar forged it until the earth became very wide'). 'Manopa' is an effort to bring an existing material into a better condition. What is done by blacksmiths who process iron into materials in other forms according to their use is one example of 'manopa'.

6. Ramot Samosir is the Parmalim (Toba Batak traditional religion) youth figure.

said that humans have divine values that must be shown in their behaviour in life (Samosir, pers. comm., 18 May 2022). Philip Lumbantobing, a Toba Batak anthropologist, emphasised that humans are a representation of the values of Debata Mulajadi Nabolon. However, Lumbantobing also reminds us that the representation of God was not only given to humans but also presented in other elements of creation (Lumbantobing 1956:27–28). For example, the creation tree named Hariara Sundung di Langit (a banyan that leans towards the sky), which was created before humans existed is a representation of the power and protection of God (Sinaga 2017:75). Water was created as a form of the holiness of God and a symbol of life for humans. Creation is not a profane reality separate from God, but a form of God's virtual presence that is sacred and divine. This, *imago Dei* in the context of Toba Batak, does not only belong to one element of creation, such as a mere human being but also the entire creation of Mulajadi Nabolon. *Imago Dei* can be interpreted as the embodiment of divine noble values in creation, not in physical imitation or degrees.

In the context of ecology, it should also be remembered that human ancestors, Raja Ihatmanisia and Boru Ihatmanisia, were not the first creatures born to Borudeakparujar as a result of her marriage to Si Raja Odapodap. Before the two human ancestors were born, Borudeakparujar had given birth to a *songon gumulgumul* [like a bun] creature whose life was only for a moment, so he was immediately buried according to Mulajadi Nabolon's orders. This *songon gumulgumul* creature is the eldest human sibling who was born in the same womb. In the soil, Mulajadi Nabolon converts it into soil, plants and nutrients needed by plants.⁷ Soil and plants (nature) are the oldest siblings of humans.

Subduing and ruling over is not hierarchical domination

Generally, Old Testament theologians interpret *imago* (Heb. *tselem*, picture) as a term related to the practice and ideology of kingdoms in the Ancient Near East that erected statues of rulers to show territorial hegemony (e.g. Brueggemann 1982:32; Rad 1972:60). Statues were erected or placed by kings in a territory where they physically could not be present. This emphasis on royal ideology in the history of Christian interpretation forms two important implications: Firstly, *imago Dei* is packaged in such a way with an androcentrism perspective as to give humans a special status compared to non-human beings. For example, W. Sibley Towner asserts that no other creature is said to be in the image of God, only humans (Towner 2005:344). This view has been preserved for a long time today. This perspective is often used for Christian apologetic purposes to strengthen the superiority of humans over other species and oppose the view that humans are merely biological beings.

7. '... gabe duhutduhut ma; ia holiholi na i, i ma gabe batu, sibuksibukna gabe tanoliat; jala mudarna i, i ma gabe pogapaa'. ['...then he became grass/plant; his bones became stone; his flesh became clay; and his blood became humus'.]

The second implication is that the ideology of the kingdom in interpreting the image (statue) of the king placed in an area places a strong emphasis on the function of power. With this, like it or not, a hierarchy of power and dominance is formed. The analogy of the hierarchy of kings, replicas (images/statues) and people is idealised in the relationship between God, humans and non-humans. As messengers of God who are present as kings on earth, humans exercise dominion over all creatures of the universe. So, for the Priestly Source (P), humans are the only type of image of God allowed on earth, made by God himself, and they have the stamp of authority over all other creations.

We offer two ways of rereading the text of Genesis 1:28. The first opens the possibility of the influence of the Persian Empire on the formation of the text. The proximity of the Persian government to the priests of Israel seems difficult to deny during the exile and after the exile, especially with the fact that the 'generosity' of King Cyrus issued a decree so that Israel was allowed to return to its ancestral land and was given significant support to rebuild the Second Temple in Jerusalem (Hinson 2012). It is also important to pay attention to David M. Carr's research linking deity icons (statues) to Babylonian ritual, given that Genesis 1 is an Israelite liturgical text written in the Babylonian Exile. In Babylonia, the shrine of worship was a representation of the cosmos. Inside the temple, they placed a statue of a god. The animation is considered to represent gods there (Carr 2021:263). This fact further strengthens Israel's attachment to the Persian Empire, both from a political and ritual-theological perspective.

Furthermore, from the socio-historical side, historians find other facts. The return of the Israelites from the Babylonian exile did not necessarily bring peace when they returned and arrived in their ancestral land. The land they had left for 70 years was and remained under Persian control. The land had been divided among the Murasu family group, which had close ties to the Persian court in Babylon (Gottwald 1987; Sipahutar 2019:175). Thus, the Israelites returned to their ancestral land that did not belong to them anymore. The people of Israel were encouraged to cultivate the land, but the proceeds were not entirely for them, but the majority was given to the Murasu family, then the Murasu family paid tribute to the Persian Empire.

Thus, the text '... Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it, rule over ...' (Gn 1:28) could have been the product of the P who was 'influenced' by the Persian court. Israeli society is encouraged to give birth to as many children as possible, which can later be used as the labour needed to plough the Murasu family's farmland. Meanwhile, the command to 'conquer' and 'rule' is a form of religious legitimacy for the natural exploitation of the Persians in the Land of Israel. By knowing the political background wrapped in Israel's sacred and liturgical texts, readers should be more careful in interpreting the text of Genesis 1:28. Literary meanings that tend to be literal can harm human relations with nature.

The second way of reading is to put the words 'subdue' (Heb. *kābaš*) and 'rule over' (Heb. *rādā*) as part of the phrase 'God blessed them'. It is interesting to observe what Fred Gottlieb said after seeing this kind of anomaly in the text of Genesis 1:28, 'the superiority of man by "subjugating" other creatures is not found in any other part of the Bible' (Gottlieb 2016:31). It seems that it is necessary to seriously interpret the word 'subdue' to avoid the relationship of human domination to nature.

These two words (*kābaš* and *rādā*) in some parts of the Bible have negative connotations. For example, *kābaš* were used as forced submission in rape (Es 7:8, Jr 34:16), *rādā* means to trample, as when squeezing grapes (Jl 3:13) and 'to rule' (21x; Ps 72:8, worldwide dominion of the king) (Jenni & Westermann 1997:883). These two words make humans so dominant, let alone associated with *tselem*. This perspective is reinforced by the statement in Psalm 8, which has similar theological views (vv. 6–7, God puts everything under human feet) (Jenni & Westermann 1997:1355). The dominance of the hierarchy is present there. If *kābaš* and *rādā* are placed in the hands of humans concerning nature, then an ecological downturn has been prophesied from the start.

To avoid this possibility, the words *kābaš* and *rādā* should be placed following the main phrase of verse 28: 'God blessed them' (in Toba Batak Bible: '*Dung i dipasupasu Debata ma nasida*'). *Pasupasu* [blessing] in the spirituality of the Toba Batak community has a constructive-continuous meaning: giving, inclusion and maintenance. It includes provisions and noble responsibilities that are conveyed by the *pasupasu* provider to the *pasupasu* recipient. *Pasupasu* is a good thing to guarantee life for the *pasupasu* recipient, and the task of the *pasupasu* recipient is to guarantee another life based on the *pasupasu* they receive.

Such interpretation of the main phrase 'God blessed (*mamasumasu*) them' will transform the words 'subdue' (*kābaš*) and 'rule over' (*rādā*) into a responsibility that is not light for humans. The *Pasupasu* (blessing) they receive make them act not only for himself but must ensure the preservation of the life of other creatures (nature).

Human and nature are *imago Dei*: Paradigm for the restoration of Tapanuli nature

Toba Batak's cosmology asserts that all creation has a divine spark. Christian interpreters attribute the *imago Dei* to humans because humans have divine values and the responsibility is given by God, so *imago Dei* in the Toba Batak anthropology belongs to humans and nature because the representation of Mulajadi Nabolon is given to all elements that exist during the creation period. That is why traditional Toba Batak rituals and prayers are said to maintain the balance of the cosmos. For example, the Taon Partanoon Ceremony (the ritual of starting the year of farming) is carried

out with prayer climbing and the first hoeing by *malim* (cleric). In addition to asking for Mulajadi Nabolon's participation, hoeing with prayer is an apology to nature if it may be hurt by human land cultivation as nature is the oldest sibling of humans. One example of such prayer, '... if living creatures and grass lose their lives because of our hoes, do not be woe to us, because greenery is the goal of our agriculture' (Rajamarpodang 1992:199).

The meaning of *imago Dei*, which departs from Toba Batak's understanding of cosmology, should have more place among members of congregations and churches in Tapanuli than the construction of Western interpretations. Has not the unity of humans with nature emphasised in traditional Toba Batak rituals been eroded as Christianity shifted the location of rituals in nature to become dominant in church buildings and altars? The Toba Batak ritual called 'Martutuaek tradition', for example, as a sacred bathing ritual for babies as well as giving a name at the *mual* [spring] has been replaced with water sprinkling baptisms held in the church building. Apart from the debate on the theological meaning of the Martutuaek ritual, the 'transfer' of this tradition into baptisms carried out in the church has broken the sacredness of *mual* in Tapanuli. Even though *mual* is an indicator of natural sustainability in an area, if nausea is still there, then it is a sign that the natural ecosystem is still awake. If *mual* is still considered a meeting place for humans and their creators, then every natural cycle also ensures that the availability of *mual* will be preserved: forests (trees), lakes and rivers.

The emphasis on ecological awareness has become a shared consciousness in the mission of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The mission of the Church is striving to bring about healing, which is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Healing is not just physical and mental recovery, but wholeness involving social, political and ecological dimensions.

'Wholeness is not a static balance of harmony but involves living in a community with God, humans, and creation'. 'The Christian medical mission aims to achieve health for all in the sense that all people around the world will have access to quality health care'. (World Council of Churches 2013:19–20)

The ecological struggle in Tapanuli was born from human hegemony towards nature. Nature is no longer considered as a person who must be respected, but only as an object to fulfil human needs. The presence of profit-oriented multinational companies in Tapanuli poses a serious threat to Tapanuli's natural preservation. The paper powder company in Porsea, which runs its production wheel by devouring trees from the Tapanuli forest, certainly does not (want to) understand that trees have spiritual value since their creation. Fish cage entrepreneurs in the waters of Lake Toba contribute fish food waste so that the lake water is polluted and the water ecosystem is disturbed. Of course, they do not understand the sacredness of Lake Toba. The Tapanuli community and the church have a responsibility to restore the weeping nature of Tapanuli. The pain that nature suffers is a wound for

humans because nature is a human being. The image of divinity does not only belong to humans because nature is also the *imago* of *Dei*.

Conclusion

The attribution of *imago Dei* only to humans is the result of a classical interpretation of Genesis 1:26–28, which is still a tradition among theologians and the church. Making humans like *imago Dei* has made him feel proud compared to other creations. So, in general, to re-think the *imago Dei* theologically is an important contribution to the theological discussion of anthropology. A broader perspective of anthropology will build a more dignified civilisation, which is not only good for humans, but also for the entire earth.

The exploitation of nature by humans occurs everywhere, especially in Tapanuli. For this reason, it is necessary to reread Genesis 1:26–28 with a biblical-cultural approach that considers the Toba Batak people's perspective on their world. In the Toba Batak cosmological narrative, humans and nature are representations of God. Both are siblings born from the same womb, Borudeakparujar. Thus, humans are responsible for maintaining and restoring injured nature, because wounds of nature are also wounds of humans.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Raja Monang Naipospos, the King of Parmalim, who provided a lot of information and data regarding the life and philosophy of the Toba Batak people. The authors are especially grateful to Ms Septemmy Lakawa, Th.D (Rector of Jakarta Theological Seminary), who has read and provided input for this research.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

A.G.P. and R.C.H.P.S. contributed to the content of Theology and E.H.H. explored information about the culture and the way of life of the Toba Batak.

Ethical considerations

This article follows all ethical standards for research.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors and the publisher.

References

- Anderson, R., 2004, 'Theological anthropology', in G. Jones (ed.), *The Blackwell companion to modern theology*, pp. 82–94, Blackwell, Malden.
- Brueggemann, W., 1982, *Genesis*, John Knox, Atlanta, GA.
- Carr, D.M., 2021, 'Competing construals of human relations with "animal" others in the primeval history (Genesis 1–11)', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140(2), 251–269. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbl.2021.0012>
- Cassuto, U., 1978, *A commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part one*, Hebrew University Press, Jerusalem.
- De Wet Oosthuizen, R., 2022, 'Decolonisation – A reading strategy for the African (re-) interpretation of the Old Testament in a (South) African context', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43(1), a2221. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2221>
- Eichrodt, W., 1960, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. I., The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Gottlieb, F., 2016, 'The creation theme in Genesis 1, Psalm 104 and Job 38–42', *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 44(1), 29.
- Gottwald, N.K., 1987, *The Hebrew Bible*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Gramont, J.D., 2005, 'Anthropology', in J.-Y. Lacoste (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Christian theology*, pp. 51–58, Routledge, New York & London.
- Hadiwijono, H., 2012, *Sari Sejarah Filsafat Barat 1*, 27th edn., Kanisius, Yogyakarta.
- Harrell, J.R., 2008, 'A womanist perspective: *Imago Dei* in black and white', *Liturgy* 23(3), 15–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04580630802003537>
- Hinson, D.F., 2012, *Sejarah Israel Pada Zaman Alkitab*, Balai Penerbit Kristen Gunung Mulia, Jakarta.
- Hutagalung, W.M., 1991, *Pustaka Batak: Tarambo Dohot Turiturian Ni Bangso Batak*, Tulus Jaya, Medan.
- Hutasoit, M., 2021, '15 Alasan Dari Ketua PGI Yang Minta PT Toba Pulp Lestari Harus Ditutup', *Djawanews*, viewed 15 March 2022, from <https://djawanews.com/berita-hari-ini/15-alasan-dari-ketua-pgi-yang-minta-pt-toba-pulp-lestari-ditutup-21556>.
- Irwandi, H., Rosid, M.S. & Mart, T., 2021, 'The effects of ENSO, climate change and human activities on the water level of Lake Toba, Indonesia', *Geoscience Letters* 8(1), 21. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40562-021-00191-x>
- Jenni, E. & Westermann, C., 1997, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA.
- Lukman, H.H., Subehi, L., Dina, R., Mayasari, N., Melati, I. & Sudriani, Y., 2021, 'Loads of pollution to Lake Toba and their impacts', *International Journal on Advanced Science, Engineering and Information Technology* 11(3), 930–936. <https://doi.org/10.18517/ijaseit.11.3.12733>
- Lumbantobing, P., 1956, *The structure of the Toba-Batak belief in the high God*, Jacob van Campen, Amsterdam.
- Marais, N., 2021, 'Alone in the world? *Imago Dei* from theological anthropology to Christology', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42(2), a2380. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i2.2380>
- McFadyen, A., 2012, 'Imaging God: A theological answer to the anthropological question?', *Zygon* 47(4), 918–933. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2012.01291.x>
- Moltmann, J., 1985, *God in creation: An ecological doctrine of creation*, SCM Press Ltd., London.
- Rad, G.V., 1972, *Genesis*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Rajamarpodang, D.J.G., 1992, *Dalihan Na Tolu: Nilai Budaya Suku Batak*, Armada, Medan.
- Saragih, B. & Sunito, S., 2001, 'Lake Toba: Need for an integrated management system', *Lakes & Reservoirs: Research and Management* 6, 247–251. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1770.2001.00155.x>
- Sarna, N., 1989, *The JPS Torah commentary: Genesis*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, PA.
- Silaban, W. & Silalahi, M.V., 2021, 'Analisis Kualitas Air Di Perairan Danau Toba Kecamatan Pangururan', *Jurnal Sains dan Teknologi* 10(2), 299–307. <https://doi.org/10.23887/jst-undiksha.v10i2.39500>
- Sinaga, A.B., 2017, *Allah Tinggi Batak Toba: Transendensi Dan Imanensi*, Kanisius, Yogyakarta.

- Sipahutar, R.C., 2019, 'Kajian Ekoteologis Tentang Konsep Tanah dalam Perjanjian Lama dan Implikasinya bagi Pemeliharaan Tanah', *BIA: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen Kontekstual* 2(2), 166–178. <https://doi.org/10.34307/b.v2i2.95>
- Sipahutar, R.C.H.P., 2020, 'Penciptaan dalam Sastra Hikmat serta Implementasinya bagi Pemeliharaan Alam', *Fidei: Jurnal Teologi Sistematis dan Praktika* 3(2), 202–227. <https://doi.org/10.34081/fidei.v3i2.152>
- Sopater, S., 2011, *Inti Ajaran Aliran Valentinian & Inti Ajaran Aliran Pangestu*, Bina Media Informasi, Bandung.
- Sundari, S. & Kintamani, E., 2021, 'Monitoring of ecosystem types in Lake Toba Region, North Sumatra', *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 762(1), 012021. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/762/1/012021>
- Towner, W.S., 2005, 'Clones of God: Genesis 1:26–28 and the image of God in the Hebrew Bible', *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 59(4), 341–356. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430505900402>
- Wolff, H.W., 1974, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, Fortress, Philadelphia, PA.
- World Council of Churches, 2013, *Together towards life: Mission and evangelism in changing landscapes*, The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), Busan.