

The Meaning of the Phrase "Be Fruitful and Multiply" According to Genesis 1:26-28 as a Response to the Childfree Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the biblical perspective regarding the childfree phenomenon, which is considered contrary to the procreation mandate in Genesis 1:26-28. Through a textual analysis of the phrase "be fruitful and multiply," this study seeks to address the childfree viewpoint in light of biblical principles. This exegetical study aims to uncover the meaning of the original language to understand its relation to the childfree perspective. The findings indicate that procreation is a prototype of God, who created humanity to share His love with them. This emphasizes that procreation reflects God's plan in creating humans to disseminate His love. It suggests that the childfree lifestyle contradicts the biblical view, as it prioritizes personal desires over God's plan. Following these findings, further literature review should be optimized through historical, grammatical, and literal contexts.

Keywords: Childfree, God, Procreation

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a sacred covenant that has been fundamental to human life since the creation of the world. Generally, marriage is considered a core element in building a family and continuing the human lineage. In many cultures around the world, the presence of children is one of the primary goals of starting a new household. Most couples who decide to marry expect the arrival of children in their lives to complete the love within the family. This becomes a fundamental aspect not only of family structure but also as a symbol of success and blessing. Traditions and cultures support this idea, which is considered an obligation to form family life (Khasanah et al., 2021).

However, in the era of Generation Z, an old phenomenon that was once rarely practiced has resurfaced as a more complex new cultural trend. This phenomenon, known as "childfree," literally means a couple's decision to forgo having children. This view has begun to spread and be widely accepted by modern society as a form of personal freedom. It represents a significant shift in attitudes toward procreation or the desire to have children. Modern society increasingly perceives having children as no longer the primary goal of marriage. The growing acceptance

of the childfree choice is driven by financial considerations or lifestyle changes, which have altered the perception of children's roles in family life.

Various reasons support the decision to live childfree. According to Victoria Tunggono's book, summarized by Rizka and her colleagues, reasons for couples choosing childfree include (1) hereditary diseases; (2) psychological aspects, where a woman may not be mentally ready to have children due to past experiences; (3) financial inability to meet a child's needs; (4) environmental issues, such as overpopulation and global warming; and (5) simply a personal decision made by the couple without any specific reason (Rizka et al., 2021, p. 337). Based on this, modern society often views having children as an obstacle to personal happiness. They feel that raising children may interfere with the pursuit of personal goals. Consequently, many in Generation Z choose to live without children, enabling them to focus on careers, experiences, and self-development.

This viewpoint has sparked debates across generations, with both sides presenting strong arguments for and against having children (Ramadhani & Tsabitah, 2022). The newer generation believes having children is a choice, not a necessity. This phenomenon is not directed at couples unable to conceive but rather at those who do not wish to have children. The decision by couples not to procreate has generated various negative perspectives, especially from a religious standpoint. These tensions cause many modern couples to face pressure from extended families and within their communities.

Based on the problem background outlined above, regarding the Bible's perspective on the childfree phenomenon, this study focuses on (1) the meaning of the phrase "be fruitful and multiply" in the context of childfree couples based on Genesis 1:26-28 and (2) whether the concept of childfree for couples who choose not to have children contradicts the biblical perspective. Therefore, this research aims to address these issues by exploring the theological meaning of Genesis 1:26-28 in-depth, providing biblical insight to modern couples.

METHODS

This study employs the Exegesis method, an approach within biblical hermeneutics designed to uncover the original meaning intended by the author of the sacred text (Grassmick, 1976). This method seeks to understand the historical context and analyze the grammatical structure through word choice and writing style, aiming to capture the hidden intent within the text. The verse under focus in this research is found in Genesis 1-11, a section that covers the cosmic history documenting the creation of the universe (Klein et al., 2017). The Indonesian Bible text used to support this study is the ITB version. In contrast, the Hebrew text examined is from the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS), the original language of the Old Testament.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Context

Authorship

The authorship of the Book of Genesis remains a subject of scholarly inquiry, as the text does not provide explicit information regarding its author (Utley, 2000, p. 12). Traditional Jewish literature attributes the authorship of Genesis, along with the other books of the Torah,

to Moses. The Torah (Comprising Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) encapsulates divine ordinances and legal Frameworks established by God since the act of creation (Lasor et al., 1996). However, pinpointing the exact time of Genesis’s composition poses challenges, necessitating an understanding of the overarching context to ascertain its historical timeline. Scholars posit that the source materials for Genesis were likely composed prior to Moses’s birth, as evidenced by references in ancient documents (Utley, 2000). In contrast, the remaining four books of the Torah are often regarded as written by Moses from a firsthand perspective, providing a narrative shaped by direct experience.

Purpose of Writing

Moses presents a foundational perspective for understanding the Bible through a monotheistic lens, focusing on “who” the personal being behind creation is and how the creation process occurred. The concept of divine unity is pivotal in comprehending the Book of Genesis, which elaborates on the relationship between God and humanity from the inception of life through to the concluding episodes of the narrative (Utley, 2000). This text underscores the imperative for the created order to adhere to the divine blueprint established by God, ensuring a sustainable and harmonious existence with the created world. Thus, this book serves not merely as an authentic historical account of creation, but also as a declaration of responsibility for the created beings, to sustain their relationship with God and His creations.

Genre of Genesis 1:26-28

The Book of Genesis is categorized within the genre of narrative, specifically historical narrative or theological history. It provides the foundational framework for a variety of theological disciplines, including biblical anthropology, sociology (marriage, family), cosmology, and soteriology (salvation). The text centers on primordial events and genealogical histories, which are substantiated by the discovery of the Qumran scrolls, commonly referred to as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which recount significant historical occurrences. Additionally, Genesis has been authenticated as existing in ancient Hebrew Script, known as Pale-Hebrew, representing some of the oldest textual evidence in biblical literature (Abegg et al., 1999). This genre not only conveys historical events but also encapsulates the theological implications inherent in the narrative of creation, reflecting the early Israelite understanding of their identity and relationship with the divine.

Literal Context

Distant Context

Be Fruitful and Multiply. The command to “be fruitful and multiply” is echoed in other parts of the Bible, particularly in Genesis 9:1, where God establishes His covenant with Noah. In this passage, God blesses Noah and commands him to “be fruitful and multiply” framing it as a response to the blessing they have received. Similarly, in Genesis 35:11, God declares, “I am God...Be fruitful and multiply” reaffirming His direct command for humanity to procreate, underscoring that God can safeguard future generations. Thus, it can be established that the command to “be fruitful and multiply” is humanity’s response to blessings already received or promised by God.

A Command of Quality. In the New Testament, the emphasis on “be fruitful and multiply” is extended in a broader sense. The phrase is no longer stated explicitly, but the mission given to families has become more focused on quality than quantity. Ephesians 6:4 instructs “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” emphasizing that God’s command has shifted from mere numerical growth as in the Old Testament to producing a quality upbringing. Moreover, in Mark 10:13-16, Jesus encourages families to bring their children to Him to receive His blessing. Therefore, it is evident that God desires families to have children as a way to fulfill the blessings He has prepared for them (Tanhidy et al., 2021).

Close Context

Genesis 1:1-2 contains information about the creation of heaven and earth, carried out by God as an expression of His divine love. Genesis 1:3-23 affirms the detailed account of world history, with an accurate historical context that indicates the timeline of creation. The world, created with precision, also demonstrates that God is the perfect Creator, especially in creating humans as the pinnacle of all creation (Feinberg, 1972). However, humans were not only created to enjoy God's love but also to fulfill a perfect mission found in Genesis 1:26-28. This mission is to care for and manage the earth, signifying humanity's primary responsibility in ensuring the continuity of life and activity on Earth (Prabowo et al., 2022).

Text Translation

Indonesia Terjemahan Baru (ITB)	King James Version (KJV)	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS)
<p>Kejadian 1:26 Berfirmanlah Allah: "Baiklah Kita menjadikan manusia menurut gambar dan rupa Kita, supaya mereka berkuasa atas ikan-ikan di laut dan burung-burung di udara dan atas ternak dan atas seluruh bumi dan atas segala binatang melata yang merayap di bumi."</p>	<p>Genesis 1:26 And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים בְּעֲשֵׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הַרֹמֵשׁ הָרֶמֶשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ: (Gen. 1:26 BHS)</p>
<p>Kejadian 1:27 Maka Allah menciptakan manusia itu menurut gambar-Nya, menurut gambar Allah diciptakan-Nya dia; laki-laki dan perempuan diciptakan-Nya mereka.</p>	<p>Genesis 1:27 So God created man in his <i>own</i> image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.</p>	<p>וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם: (Gen. 1:27 BHS)</p>
<p>Kejadian 1:28 Allah memberkati mereka, lalu</p>	<p>Genesis 1:28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, “Be fruitful, and</p>	<p>וַיִּבְרַךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וּכְבִשְׁהָ וּרְדוּ בְּדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל-חַיֵּיהֶם הָרֹמֵשׁ עַל-הָאָרֶץ:</p>

<p>Allah berfirman kepada mereka: "Beranakcuculah dan bertambah banyak; penuhilah bumi dan taklukkanlah itu, berkuasalah atas ikan-ikan di laut dan burung-burung di udara dan atas segala binatang yang merayap di bumi."</p>	<p>multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”</p>	<p>(Gen. 1:28 BHS)</p>
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Table 1: Translation of Genesis 1:26-28

The table above contains translations of the pericope Genesis 1:26-28, used for comparison in this study. This research involves several versions of Bible translations, each representing different languages. First, the *Indonesia Terjemahan Baru* (ITB) represents the Indonesian language translation. Second, the King James Version (KJV) is used to represent the English translation. Finally, the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) is used to represent the original Old Testament text in Hebrew.

Text Analysis and Interpretation

Verse 26

Genesis 1:26 highlights the term *בְּצַלְמֵנוּ* (be-tzalmenu), derived from the word *צֶלֶם* (tselem), which signifies "likeness." Thus, *בְּצַלְמֵנוּ* (be-tzalmenu) refers to a unique reflection of God’s character. Being created "in our image, after our likeness" implies that humans are made in the Divine image, not only physically but encompassing all aspects of life (e.g., moral and spiritual dimensions). This likeness signifies that humans hold intrinsic value, just as God is valuable in the life of humanity (Holladay, 2000, p. 306).

The term "tselem" is often used negatively in contexts describing idols (e.g., 2 Kings 11:18, Amos 5:26, and others). However, Genesis 1:26 uniquely employs "tselem" to suggest that humans (*אָדָם* Adam – both male and female) are created with an identity that represents the Creator. This understanding broadens the perspective that humans are created with a specific purpose (Zuck, 2015).

The phrase "in our image" (*בְּצַלְמֵנוּ na'aseh*) – (an act of creation by the Triune God) establishes the notion that humans are created with profound value. Creation, reflecting the Creator, becomes a grand narrative in cosmic history, introducing the core of life itself. Accordingly, the appropriate human response to God’s creative decision is gratitude, recognizing that human creation is not an accident but a blessing.

Verse 27

Genesis 1:27 attests to the fact that humans were created perfectly according to God’s design. In this verse, the phrase "bara" (create) is repeated three times, emphasizing the significance of human creation within the cosmic context. Additionally, the phrase "*בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים* be-tzalmo be-tselem" or "in His image, in the image of God" is repeated, underscoring the critical role of humanity as bearers of the Divine image (Brown et al., 1997, p. 135).

The role of bearing the Divine image is given equally to both "זָכָר וְיָקָהָה *zākār* (male) *ūnəqēbāh* (female)," which also refers to אִישׁ (*Ish*) and אִשָּׁה (*Ishah*). These two sexes, created as equals, represent the first pair, playing a crucial role in reflecting God's character (Hasel, 1975). The text asserts that from the beginning, they originated from God's image, with both having an intimate role in procreation, establishing future leaders of the earth. However, the names of these two humans are not identified until the end of chapter 3; they are referred to as male and female. This suggests that God's command or message in Genesis 1-3 applies universally to all humanity across generations.

Verse 28

וַיְבָרֶכֶה, *vayevarekh* (waw-consecutive imperfect) comes from the root verb בָּרַךְ (*barak*), meaning "to bless" or "to bestow blessings," in the phrase "God blessed them," which is recorded 415 times in the Bible (Enoh & Filion, 2012, pp. 151-152). According to grammatical parsing, *vayevarekh* indicates the act of blessing by God as a direct consequence of the creation process described in verses 26-27. The use of the waw-consecutive imperfect grammatical form emphasizes that God's act of blessing humanity was not confined to a single moment. However, rather, the blessing continues in alignment with the divine plan, which remains ongoing (Brown et al., 1997).

פְּרוּ, *Peru* (verb qal imperative), in the second person plural form, expresses the imperative command for two individuals, the man, and the woman, to "be fruitful." Grammatically, the plural form represents a directive to all of humanity through the lineage of the first couple in creation. The term *peru*, or "to bear fruit," when associated with plants, signifies fertility or blessings that are linked to the procreative aspect of human life.

In Strong's concordance #6509, *peru* refers to the activity of being fertile or producing offspring (Brown et al., 1997, p.826). This is related to physical reproduction, as well as symbolic reproduction, in the context of spirituality. The grammatical form of *peru* in verse 28 falls under the category of active verbs (qal), reinforced by its plural and imperative form. Thus, the command to "be fruitful" is not optional but rather a directive that must be fulfilled by humanity as a whole.

The term וּרְבוּ, *urvu* (verb qal imperative plural), derived from the root רָבָה (*ravah*), means "to multiply, to increase, to grow in number, or to bear fruit." This verb, too, appears in an active and simple form, indicating that the action of "multiplying" is an active role performed by humans (Koehler, 1994). However, this is not advice or counsel but a clear instruction from God to humanity. The imperative verb underscores that all humans who have entered into marriage must obey this command, as established in verse 27. The act of multiplying is a response to the blessings bestowed by God, wherein He grants humanity the capacity to fulfill His command and ensure the continuation of descendants on Earth. In other words, when humans engage in fulfilling the procreative mandate, they are partaking in God's blessings.

Verse 28 concludes with the phrase, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air...." This statement supports the procreation command from the preceding section. The directive to "subdue... have dominion" reflects God's design for humans to enjoy His blessings and create an environment (מִלְאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ, *Mil'u et ha-aretz* – "fill the earth") that is populated with

reflections of God's character through procreation. In other words, this command ensures that the perfect humans He created will continually experience joy through God's ongoing blessings (Fathony, 2023).

God's blessing in verses 27-28 demonstrates that He is preparing and building this promise within married couples. This promise will be fulfilled if humanity adheres to God's mandate concerning procreation. The concept of procreation is God's purpose for filling the Earth with His image. When humans who have been blessed enter into marriage and adhere to this command, they receive the promised blessing. However, those who deviate from God's plan are seen as rejecting the blessings that He offers.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, SUGGESTION, AND LIMITATIONS

Conclusion

The analysis and interpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 reveal that the phrase “be fruitful and multiply” in the context of marriage is an integral part of humanity's purpose in creation. Second, God provides complete blessings to couples who follow His command, particularly in relation to procreation. Third, couples who choose to be childfree out of selfish motives are rejecting participation in God's plan. Fourth, God commands couples to have children as a solution to the evil in the world by creating generations that carry His character.

These four principles derived from Genesis 1:26-28 illustrate that children are a beautiful gift from God, complementing the harmony of the family. The grace of having children is a divine blessing that should not be rejected. This is because procreation represents God's prototype, as He desires to create human beings to share His love with them. Therefore, the childfree lifestyle contradicts the biblical view when it halts procreation in favor of selfish interests over God's plan.

Theological Implications

Genesis 1:26-28, concerning procreation and anti-procreation, highlights the strong debate surrounding humanity's duty to fulfill God's command. This text emphasizes that human beings, created in the image of God, also received the command to “be fruitful and multiply.” This command carries deeper meanings related to marriage, decision-making, reproduction, and participation in God's love project. Procreation is not merely about the desire to have children but about generating a life that reflects the attributes of God.

Verse 27 marks the beginning of the mandate established by God for every married couple. This mandate was given to affirm the purpose of marriage, which centers on love. However, marriage also has a greater purpose: the reception of the command to have children to propagate God's character in the world. Building a population that embodies God's character will fulfill the creative project of establishing a world filled with love.

The choice to live a life without having children is sometimes associated with the command in Genesis 1:28 to “subdue” and “have dominion,” referring to humanity's responsibility to care for and maintain creation. Caring for children is a responsibility that

modern generations often fear due to the complexities of raising children. They view marriage as separate from the duty of procreation, leading to the childfree lifestyle being considered an alternative decision for couples who do not want to have children.

However, Genesis 1:28 is not merely about procreation; it also depicts God's generosity in inviting humanity to be His partners on Earth. The childfree lifestyle, which expresses a rejection of having children, is essentially a rejection of God's plan for the world. This has deep implications, indicating that God's people, who understand His plan, should participate in having children who are prepared to carry the image of God (Schrock, 2013).

Suggestion and Limitations

Considering the findings from the exegesis of Genesis 1:26-28, there are limitations in examining various aspects that may influence couple's decisions to be childfree. The researcher recommends that further studies be conducted to delve deeper into the meaning of the phrase "be fruitful and multiply" within the historical and cultural contexts surrounding the issuance of this command. Additionally, expanding the scope of research to include diverse aspects could enrich societal understanding from both biblical and social perspectives.

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