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to

or

Two biblical texts make counter commands. Which one are we to believe?



to serve?

**Why did God create human beings?** In the creation stories of Genesis there are two possible answers to that question. The first answer is that God created humans to rule and subdue Earth. The second is that God created humans to serve and preserve Earth. And there is currently a fierce debate as to which answer is preferable and what the implications might be.

### The mandate to rule

In Genesis 1 we read that God created human beings in God's image. God then blessed them so that they would multiply and 'rule' over all other living creatures and 'subdue' Earth (1:26-28).

Now the Hebrew term for 'rule' refers to what a king does when he has dominion over his enemies or his subjects. In Psalm 72, for example, the psalmist prays that the 'rule' of the king would be from sea to sea, that his foes would bow down before him and

lick his feet. So, the normal meaning of the Hebrew term for 'rule' is to dominate.

And the Hebrew term for 'subdue' is just as tough. It can mean 'crush under foot' (Micah 7:19), 'ravish women' (Nehemiah 5:5) or conquer a land. The land of Canaan is pronounced 'subdued' after Joshua conquers it (Joshua 18:1). The normal meaning of the Hebrew term translated 'subdue' is to overcome or crush.

There are scholars who argue that because humans are in the image of God, they should rule as God rules, that is, with justice. Or they should conquer with compassion. Either way, the text seems to provide a mandate to dominate creation.

And in the history of Christianity we can find numerous leaders who declare that because humans are created superior to the rest of creation they are to represent God and rule over creation. In popular

jargon we still speak of 'harnessing' nature and 'conquering' Everest. That the mandate to dominate and subdue Earth was a living force among early settlers is illustrated by a 19th-century poem, *The Pioneers*, by Frank Masters, an elder in a Christian congregation in Driver River, New South Wales:

'It was the overflow westward of the mainland expansion that surged first to the plains of this goodly land. Then tackled scrub with roller and axe, an exodus obedient to great Biblical command: "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it!" with its accompanied blessing.'

### The commission to serve

In Genesis 2, however, we read that God made the first human and planted a forest of trees in Eden.

