Talk to Christians interested in relating their faith to environmental concerns, and at some point the phrase "Dominion Theology" will arise. This comes from Genesis 1:26, which is conventionally translated as

> 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.

The above translation (with my emphasis) is taken from the King James Version, but it is very close to just about every other English translation.

The word "dominion" looms large, both for those Christians who are environmentalists and those who are skeptical of environmentalism. The latter see the notion as meaning "dominate" or more pointedly, "use for human purposes." They thus reject the notion that preservation of nature is good in and of itself. The former see it as expressing the notion of stewardship, and thus embracing the idea that preserving nature ***is*** good for it's own sake.

But the problem is that it's an inaccurate translation!

One of the tasks of being a rabbinic student is spending a lot of time learning how to translate, and thus really jumped out at me a couple of days ago. The Bible does not say "let them have dominion." Instead, it uses the Hebrew verb *yirdu*. And what does that mean? Well — it's hard to tell.

The Hebrew verb root *y-r-d* means "to descend" or "to go down." So in one way, the phrase really should read "and let them descend to the fish of the sea" etc. etc. What might that signify? I don't know, but it's hardly unproblematic to read it as "have dominion."

It gets trickier. *Yirdu* is a very strange way to conjugate the verb: it is in a verb form called *Piayl*, but the root *y-r-d* usually doesn't take that form. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon, which is sort of the gold standard of Biblical Hebrew translation, doesn't even attempt to define it in that form. Most of the time, if a regular (*Qal*) verb form is put into *Piayl,* it signifies intensifying it in some way. For example, when the root *k-t-v,* it means "to write"; when it's in *Piayl,* it means "to engrave." So what would it mean to intensify "descending"? Well, we can have a

lot of arguments about it, but “have dominion” doesn’t seem the most obvious translation. Later on, God tells Adam to “subdue the earth,” and that does indeed seem to be a good, straightforward translation, but we need to know more about what that might mean. Subdue for what purpose?

And that means that all these arguments about the meaning of “dominion” beg the question of what God is saying to begin with. My initial impression is that in this case, “to descend” means something akin to “commune with”, or “go on the level of.” But that in and of it raises more questions than it answers.

Christian theologians know their Hebrew; the language is required at most seminaries worth their salt, and indeed, the “Briggs” in the Brown-Driver-Briggs dictionary was Charles Augustus Briggs, the great late 19th and early 20th Christian scholar. This might be an interesting place for fruitful interchange (so to speak) between Jewish and Christian thinkers. But before doing this, we all need to get away from the idea of “dominion.”

UPDATE: Just to be clear, Jewish translations have not been any better. The Artscroll uses “dominion,” as does the original 1917 Jewish Publication Society version. The difference is that within Jewish thought, the phrase has not had much of an impact on environmental thinking.