



[At about this time last year I wrote a post on dominion theology](#), a type of Christian belief that, when it comes to the environment, takes the notion of humanity's rule over nature very seriously and sees humanity's rule as something close to absolute. It comes from the passage in Genesis 1:26, which reads:

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.

Last year, I wondered where the notion of "dominion" could come from, since the Hebrew word usually translated as "dominion" — מְדוּלָּה — does not mean "dominion" but rather "descend." What could it mean, I asked, for humanity to "descend" to nature? And what does it have to do with dominion?

Not surprisingly, 1) there is an answer to this question; and 2) if we take Biblical interpretation seriously, then it could mean the exact *opposite* of sometimes anti-environmental dominion theology.

It turns out that the word "מְדוּלָּה", like so much of Biblical Hebrew, has an ambiguous meaning. It could be the future subjunctive of the verb מָלַךְ, which indeed means "to dominate" or "to rule" or "to have dominion", i.e. "let them rule." But without vowel markings — which none of the original Biblical texts had — it could also be the future subjunctive of the verb יָרַד, which means "to descend" or "to go down." It certainly makes sense to read it as the former, but then why make it so ambiguous? There are lots of ways in Hebrew to say "to rule over": why do it in a way that makes the meaning unclear?

Well, as it turns out, the early rabbis wondered the same thing, and came up with a deeply insightful response: it actually means *both things*, and that contains an important lesson for us today:

AND HAVE DOMINION (REDU) OVER THE FISH OF THE SEA.... (1:26). R. Hanina said: "If he merits it, [God says] 'uredu' (have dominion); while if he does not merit it, [God says,] 'yerdu' (let them descend). R. Jacob of Kfar Hanan said: "Of him who is in Our image and likeness [I say] 'uredu' (have dominion); but of him who is not in our image and likeness [I say] 'yerdu' (let them descend).

This is from "[Genesis Rabbah](#)," (גניס רבב), a 4th century CE work of "[Midrash](#)," or early rabbinic Biblical interpretation and commentary. The very ambiguity, said the rabbis, tells humanity how to care for nature. If humanity treats nature as someone who merits being in the image of God, then he will rule over nature. If he does not, then he will descend to the level of the lowest creatures.

Whatever it might mean to act toward nature as one who is "in the image of God," it surely is not traditional Dominion Theology, which stresses the right of humanity to subjugate, control, and exploit nature. Instead, it suggests some sort of stewardship paradigm, although it is far from clear what that might precisely entail. That's for another post.