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And God blessed them and God said to them,  
 “Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and master it,  
 and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the flyer of the heaven,  
 and every live creature that creeps on the earth.” (*Genesis* 1:28)

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים  
 פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹּשׁוּהָ  
 וַרְדּוּ בְּדִגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם  
 וּבְכָל־חַיָּה הַרְמֵשֶׁת עַל־הָאָרֶץ:  
 בְּרֵאשִׁית אֶבְרָחָם

## The Human Place in Nature

by Ellen Bernstein

In 1967, historian Lynn White argued, in a now famous essay in *Science Magazine*, that the Bible gave humanity a mandate to exploit nature when it empowered the *adam*/human to “master the earth,” and “have dominion over” it.<sup>1</sup> Many environmentalists and theologians are still haggling over White’s thesis even after hundreds of articles and books have tackled the topic over the last 30 years.<sup>2</sup>

In my environmental studies courses at U.C. Berkeley in the early 70s, we read White’s article and were taught that the theology of the Bible laid the ideological roots for the current environmental crisis. I naively accepted this idea, having no real knowledge of the Bible and no positive experience of religion. It was comforting to find a scapegoat to blame for society’s problems, and religion has always been an easy target.

White’s interpretation of Genesis had enormous ramifications on a whole generation of environmentalists and their students. I still encounter some who challenge my work, insisting that Judaism couldn’t possibly have ecological integrity because “the Bible encourages people to control nature.” They shun organized religion, claiming that it is the source of the environmental problem.

It is conceivable that people who have little experience reading the Bible could examine this verse and decide that the language of “dominion” and “mastery over nature” is anti-ecological. But a verse is not a collection of words, just as nature is not a collection of plants and animals. Extracting a word or verse out of its context is like removing a tree from its habitat -- taking it from the soil, the weather, and all the creatures with which it lives in total interdependence. It would be impossible to really know the tree outside of its relationships. It’s no different with the Bible. When you read the Bible, you have to consider the derivation of the words under consideration, the meaning of the

neighboring words and verses, the message of the Bible as a whole, the context in which it was written, and how others have understood the verse throughout its 3000 year history.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of “dominion” in this context is a blessing/*bracha*, a divine act of love. While God blessed the birds and fishes with fertility, God blessed humanity with both fertility *and* authority over nature. In more abstract terms, the fish receive a blessing in a horizontal dimension, while the *adam* is blessed in both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Like the animals, the *adam* is called to multiply and spread over the earth, but, unlike the animals, he stands upright as God’s deputy, overseeing all the animals and the plants.<sup>4</sup>

Caring for Creation is an awesome responsibility. The Psalmist captures the sense of undeserved honor that humanity holds:

What are human beings that You are mindful of them  
Mortals that You care for them?  
You have made them a little lower than God,  
And crowned them with glory and honor.  
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands,  
You have put all things under their feet,  
all sheep and oxen and also the beasts of the field the birds of the air  
and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea.<sup>5</sup>

As a blessing, responsibility for Creation is a gift. According to anthropologist Lewis Hyde, the recipients of a gift become custodians of the gift. The Creation is a sacred trust and dominion is the most profound privilege.

It is necessary to remember the context of blessing as we examine the so-called “accused” words, **כבש** “master,” and **רדה**, “have dominion over.” It is also important to remember that Hebrew is a more symbolic, multilayered, and vague language than English — any single word root can have multiple meanings, and often a word and its opposite will share the same word root. According to Bible scholar Norbert Samuelson, both **כבש**/master and **רדה**/have dominion over appear in these particular grammatical forms here and nowhere else in the Bible, so translating them is not a cut and dried affair. The root of the Hebrew word for mastery, **כבש**, is related to the Aramaic “to tread down” or “make a path.” In the book of Zechariah, the root **כבש** is interchangeable with the root **אכל**, the word for “eat.” Although **כבש** is often translated as “subdue” or “master,” it appears to have agricultural implications.

The root of the Hebrew word for “have dominion over,” **רדה**, generally refers to the “rule over subjects.” In a play on the word **רדה**, Rashi, the foremost medieval rabbinic commentator, explains that if we consciously embody God’s image and rule with wisdom and compassion, we will rise above the animals and preside over, **רדה**, them, insuring a life of harmony on earth. However if we are oblivious to our power and deny our responsibility to Creation, we will **ירד**, sink below the level of the animals and bring

ruin to ourselves and the world.<sup>6</sup> If we twist the blessing to further our own ends, the blessing becomes a curse. The choice is ours.

As I was writing my book, *The Splendor of Creation: A Biblical Ecology*,<sup>7</sup> I had long discussions with environmentalists and feminists who urged me to substitute a less “offensive” word for the word “dominion,” the traditional translation of **רָדָה**. They argued that “dominion” carries the negative connotations of control and domination. I considered what they said, and pondered the nuances of other words like “govern” or “preside over,” (one feminist suggested “have provenance over”). I decided that while these words are less offensive, they are also less inspired; they do not carry the sense of dignity and nobility captured by “dominion”; they do not capture the sense of taking responsibility for something much larger than oneself.

Like the Hebrew **רָדָה**, “dominion” implies two sides: graciousness *and* domination. Dominion, like money, is not in itself bad; it all depends on how we exercise it. As Rashi said, we can recognize our responsibility to nature and rise to the occasion to create an extraordinary world, or we can deny our responsibility and sink to our basest instincts (dominating nature) and destroy the world. Such is the human condition. It is time that we understand our conflicting tendencies and deal with them, rather than deny their existence.<sup>8</sup>

Humanity’s role is to tend the garden, not to possess it; to “guard it and keep it,”<sup>9</sup> not to exploit it; to pass it on as a sacred trust, as it was given. Even though we are given the authority to have dominion over the earth and its creatures, we are never allowed to own it, just as we can’t own the waters or the air. “The land cannot be sold in perpetuity.”<sup>10</sup> The land is the commons and it belongs to everyone equally and jointly. In the biblical system, private property does not even exist, because God owns the land and everything in it. (When the State of Israel was established, the Jewish National Fund took responsibility for the management of the land — with an original intention to ensure its perpetuity.)

The blessing of mastery over the earth calls us to exercise compassion and wisdom in our relationship with nature so that the Creation will keep on creating for future generations. We use nature every day in every thing we do; nature provides our food, shelter, clothing, energy, electricity, coal, gas. “Mastering” nature involves determining how much land and which animals should be designated for human use and the development of civilization, and what should remain untouched.

According to Saadia Gaon in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, “mastery” of nature meant harnessing the energy of water and wind and fire; cultivating the soil for food; using plants for medicines; fashioning utensils for eating and writing; and developing tools for agricultural work, carpentry and weaving. It meant the beginning of art, science, agriculture, metallurgy, architecture, music, technology, animal husbandry, land use planning, and urban development.<sup>11</sup>

That the power is in humanity's hands is clearly a risk for all of Creation. Indeed the rabbis question why God created humanity, with the capacity to do evil, in the first place. Some of them figured that humanity would only destroy itself and the world. But our ability to choose between good and bad is what makes us human. Free choice is what distinguishes us from animals, who follow their instinct, and angels, who have no will of their own and act entirely on God's decrees. It is up to us to determine if we will make of ourselves a blessing or a curse. To rule nature with wisdom and compassion is our greatest challenge, our growth edge. It demands that we understand ourselves and guard against our own excesses and extremes; it demands a constant level of heightened awareness.

One of the pleasures of grappling with a biblical text is that one can always find new meanings in it. Over the years as I've turned this verse over and over, I've discovered a psycho-spiritual nuance. The complementary pair of blessings, "fertility" and "mastery," can be understood as blessings for "love" and "work." Fertility implies love, creativity and being; mastery implies work, strength, and doing.

For most of us, love and work are the two dimensions that define our lives; for Freud, they set the criteria for a healthy life. The complementary pair, love and work, take other forms such as being and doing, sex and power. God blesses us with the ability to experience both. Yet our contemporary worldview attributes more value to our dominating side, to work, than to our fertile side, to love. It's important to temper our dominating tendencies with our fertile, creative ones, and to remember that mastery over the earth is a sacred act, just like love. They both invite the Divine in us.

**Endnotes:**

1. White, Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" in *Science* 155, (March 10, 1967)
2. Wendell Berry, environmental writer and farmer, appalled by this anti-environmental reading of Genesis demanded, "How, for example, would one arrange to 'replenish the earth' if 'subdue' means, as alleged, 'conquer' or 'defeat' or 'destroy'?" Berry contends: "The ecological teaching of the Bible is simply inescapable: God made the world because He wanted it made. He thinks the world is good and He loves it. It is His world; He has never relinquished title to it. . . If God loves the world, then how might any person of faith be excused for not loving it or justified in destroying it?" Berry, Wendell. *What are People For?* San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990, p.99
3. The historical context is this: In all the biblical commentaries over the last 2000 years, the rabbis rarely even mentioned dominion, undoubtedly because Jews rarely "owned" their own land for most of history, and consequently were not in a position to dominate nature. What little the rabbis did say about dominion—most rabbinic commentary focuses on the "be fruitful" half of the verse—was framed in the context of governance of nature, never control. They compared humanity's dominion of nature on the sixth day to God's governance of the luminaries on the fourth day. Humanity's charge is to preserve the order and integrity of Creation, maintaining all the diverse kinds of organisms. The prototype of dominion was Adam's stewardship of the Garden of Eden (*Genesis* 11:15) to watch over the garden.
4. Zornberg, Aviva. *The Beginning of Desire*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995.
5. *Psalms* 8:6
6. Rashi, *Commentary on Genesis* 1:26.
7. Bernstein, Ellen. *The Splendor of Creation: A Biblical Ecology*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005.
8. Provocative verses in the Bible have generated thousands of years of rabbinic debate. But other than the comment by Rashi, the rabbis are, by and large, silent on the question of "dominion" and "mastery of the earth." Since throughout history, Jews were rarely allowed to own land, the rabbis undoubtedly found the idea of mastering the earth and the creatures irrelevant to their circumstances. They were

more concerned that people would not be able to master their passions and their pride than that people would (improperly) master the earth and the animals. One must learn to balance oneself before taking charge of anything else.

Rather than giving humanity a mandate to control or exploit the earth, the primary object lesson of the Bible is that of humility. We need a sense of humility to balance our sense of pride. Through stories and laws, the futility of hubris is taught over and over again. The *Midrash* asks: "Why does God create all of the creatures before humanity? So human beings should not grow too proud. You can say to them, 'Even the gnat came before you in the Creation!'" (*Tosefta Sanhedrin* 8:4))

Indeed the whole book of Ecclesiastes is a commentary on the pointlessness of vanity.

What befalls the generations of man befalls the beast. . .  
as the one dies, so the other dies.  
Yes, they all have one breath  
Man has no preeminence above the beasts  
for all is vanity  
All go to one place  
All are dust and return to dust  
Who knows the spirit of man, whether it rises up  
and the spirit of beast whether it descends below to the earth?  
(*Ecclesiastes* 4:19-21)

And God's longest monologue in the entire Bible is a desperate cry of despair at the arrogance of humans.

Can he be taken by his eyes?  
Can his nose be pierced by hooks?  
Can you draw out Leviathan by a fishhook?  
Can you put a ring through his nose  
Or pierce his jaws with a barb?  
Will he plead with you at length?  
Will he speak soft words to you?  
Will he make an agreement with you  
To be taken as your lifelong slave?  
Will you play with him like a bird and tie him down for your girls?  
Shall traders traffic in him?  
Will he be divvied up among merchants? (*Job* 40:24-30)

9. *Genesis* 2:15.

10. *Leviticus* 25:23.

11. Rav Saadia Gaon, *Commentary on Genesis 1:26*; the Christian theologian Claus Westermann highlights the unfolding development of a distinctively human civilization replete with technological discovery and artistic refinement. Westermann, Claus. *Creation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1974, p. 25.

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