

What It Means to “Have Dominion”

“IF GOD DIDN’T WANT us to eat animals, why would they be made of meat?” “Humans didn’t climb their way to the top of the food chain to eat vegetables!” “Animals are for people to use however they want.” I was born and raised in a Christian home and took for granted that statements like these were true without questioning their ramifications on my relationship with God and the rest of God’s creation. After I learned about violence-ridden standard agricultural practices and the inefficiency of producing animal foods for human consumption in the United States, along with the host of other ways humans have abused their position as stewards, I began to question these assumptions. In this chapter, I posit that a proper interpretation of dominion and the *imago Dei* is that humans are partners in a circle of all life, that all species depend on one another and are in God’s care.

Dominion—Traditional Views

The first creation account in Genesis tells us that God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Gen 1:26). Reflecting centuries of Aristotelian thinking, humans have improperly viewed the *imago Dei* and dominion as rights rather than privileges. As a result, we have created a false hierarchy of dominant beings controlling and using “others” for our own gain.¹ Aquinas also viewed nonhuman animals in a utilitarian way—humans were not

1. Linzey, *Why Animal Suffering Matters*, 12.

connected in a holistic sense to creation. Instead, God's creation existed to serve humans, who were the divine image-bearers.² He argued against extending neighborly love to nonhuman animals because in his view, they "have no fellowship with man in the rational life."³ But of course, basing the value of a life on the ability to reason is fraught with problems, to which those who work to protect the unborn, the developmentally delayed, and sufferers of dementia will attest.

The idea that animals are ours to use has been a widely accepted view throughout history. Vidler points to the frequent use of animals for human ends throughout the Bible as proof that their bodies are divinely granted for our means.⁴ Calvin goes further, calling vegetarian diets "insupportable tyranny" and saying that they cause "atrocious injury" to God.⁵ Others have used the assumption of difference as permission to act upon animals in any way they see fit, no matter how gruesome or cruel. Under the influence of Descartes and his teaching that animals were "thoughtless brutes," his supporters cut them open in city squares in order to study them, didn't bother to put them out of their misery, and equated their screams with the sounds of a machine that needed oiling. I really want to punch Descartes in the face, even though I try to be a nonviolent person. In these views, which have dominated Christian activity for centuries, humans are a species set above the rest, and it is our right and obligation to use the earth and its inhabitants to further human (and only human) self-interest.

Not every old European theologian got the creation story wrong. John Wesley points out that the humans who were originally granted dominion over creation were far more impressive than the broken ones who emerged from the ark. Wesley preached that Adam was "the supreme perfection of man . . . continually seeing, and loving, and obeying the Father of the spirits of all flesh . . . To *this* creature, endued with all these excellent faculties, thus qualified for his high charge, God said, 'Have thou dominion.'"⁶ Unlike Calvin's claim that to refrain from eating meat is "tyranny," Wesley argued that humans have so corrupted the original meaning of dominion that they

2. Linzey, *Animal Theology*, 18.

3. *Ibid.*, 14.

4. Vidler, "Animals," cited in Linzey and Regan, *Animals and Christianity*, 197–98.

5. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, cited in Linzey and Regan, *Animals and Christianity*, 200.

6. Wesley, "Sermon LXXV: The General Deliverance," in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 254.

have become tyrants themselves: “The human shark, without any such necessity, torments [animals] of his own free choice: and, perhaps, continues their lingering pain, till, after months or years, death signs their release.”⁷

Regardless of whether or not the human is a tyrant for eating flesh or a tyrant for refraining from animal flesh, in this framework, humans stand between God and animals. From the perspective of both Calvin and Wesley, the only value that animals provide creation is their use to humans. Though the self-serving view has been popular, it is unbiblical.

Typically, both the subject and object of the Hebrew word translated in the Genesis creation story as “dominion” (רָדָה, *rdh*) are human, and the word frequently refers to the actions of a king: neither is the case in Genesis 1:26.⁸ Further, while violence and force are frequently associated with the use of *rdh* in the Hebrew Scriptures, in Genesis 1:26 and 28, a slightly different interpretation is required, precisely because we view the verb through the lens of being made in the image of God. God deals mercifully with us, evidenced over and over again both in the Bible and in history. God, who is all-powerful, deals with our ineptitude with overwhelming kindness and sacrifice . . . and we reflect that by engaging in the wholesale slaughter and destruction of other created beings. Something is terribly amiss.

What if we thought about dominion here as a blessing to bless, instead of violently suppress?⁹ And what if we consider that this blessing is followed immediately by a prescription for a plant-based diet? “The right to kill animals is excluded from the lordship of human beings over them . . . Human lordship on earth is the lordship exercised by a tenant on God’s behalf. It means stewardship over the earth, for God.”¹⁰ When God granted dominion over the new creation and told human creatures to be its stewards, God did not mean that we could eat animals. This is made so very clear by the very next declaration: that animals and humans alike are to eat only plants.

Creation receives its value not from the actions of humans but directly from God. As a result, the value of nonhuman creation to humans is unrelated to its value to God, and we must begin to realize that since animals have value to God apart from their use to us, it is out of step with our role as protector and caretaker to exercise tyranny and absolute power (the power of life and death) over animals, particularly if granting or taking life has

7. Ibid., 257.

8. Zobel, “רָדָה,” 331.

9 Ibid., 335.

10. Moltmann, *Creating a Just Future*, 224.

nothing whatsoever to do with the animals' own welfare and serves only to satisfy our greed or appetite. Absolute power and the wielding of absolute power rests solely in God's hands.¹¹

When coupled with the *imago Dei*, dominion must be exercised as God's caring hand, not an iron fist. "The task of 'dominion' does not have to do with exploitation and abuse. It has to do with securing the well-being of every other creature and bringing the promise of each to full fruition."¹² Some traditional interpretations of *imago Dei* and the task of dominion have contributed to a dangerous trend among Euro-Western contemporary Christians to trample on nonhuman creation and deny or dismiss the disastrous consequences of humancentric interpretations of the creation story, including the devastating impact of environmental destruction on the world's most impoverished human inhabitants.¹³ Even critiques calling for humans to exercise restraint and responsibility in their dealings with creation order the creation story around humans—human rights, human responsibilities, human relationships.

How did this happen? One Jewish theologian points to translation choices as the root of historical decisions about the role of animals in relation to human creation:

As the offspring of God's word and the earth's fertile receptiveness to God's command, animals are described as "living souls" or "living beings" (*nephesh*). The exact same term is used in Genesis to describe human beings, and thus implies a profound kinship, making human-animal ontological continuity explicit. Other Hebrew biblical terminology reflects this unity . . . the phrase "spirit of life" (*ruach hayyim*) can indicate both animals and humans, as can the word "flesh" (*basar*) . . . In a similar manner, the expression "all flesh" (*kol basar*) can mean "all living creatures, animal as well as human."¹⁴

What the faithful Christian is left to do, then, is refrain from using an argument in favor of human worth in order to devalue other God-created beings.¹⁵ In other words, God has enough love for every being. Yes, every being.

11. Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals*, 25–26.

12. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 32.

13. Woodley, *Shalom*, 57.

14. Moritz, "Animals and the Image of God," 135.

15. Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals*, 75–76.

Dominion—Contemporary Views

Some modern theologies attempt to counter the traditional view of dominion and forward a more sustainable theology of humanity in creation by calling for human stewardship of creation, perhaps to make consideration for nonhuman interests more palatable. It is nice to be needed, after all. Biblical commentator R. R. Reno says that the exercise of dominion allows things to “flourish according to their proper purposes.”¹⁶ Reno also claims that “to govern and be governed is a crucial way in which humans differ from animals,”¹⁷ a statement that betrays a lack of understanding of animal behavior (think about pecking order, pack behavior, etc.).

Let’s problematize this notion of stewardship. There is an implicit and dangerous hierarchy in the idea of stewardship as it is presented today, a privileging of human animals over nonhuman ones. Miller, for instance, argues that nonhuman animals do not have a choice to be in relationship with God, that what sets humans apart is our ability, our freedom, to choose to accept or decline the responsibility God has bestowed on us. As a result, human-to-human relationships have an inherent mutuality of which human-animal relationships are not capable. Our relational nature rightly includes relations with nonhuman creation, though humans carry the burden of moral responsibility for our relationships with nonhuman created beings.¹⁸ Miller here is attempting to widen the circle of human compassion, but his model still ultimately relies on a humancentric reading of the Genesis creation story.

Though eco-feminist theologian Sallie McFague also argues for a more holistic and responsible view of humans in creation, including a strong interdependence, her analysis of the nature of the *imago Dei* also reflects a built-in hierarchical view of humans. McFague’s model of God as Mother and analogy of humans as co-creators in the garden of creation attempts to subvert the traditional patnocentric theology, but still relies on humans as special administrators of ecological balance.¹⁹ The challenge of McFague’s model is that it may be difficult to understand oneself and other humans as caretakers, as the only conscientized beings, the only

16. Reno, *Genesis*, 54.

17. *Ibid.*, 55.

18. Miller, “Responsible Relationship,” 335–39.

19. McFague, *Models of God*, 120.

beings aware of our cultural, historical, and physical place, and still manage to reject hierarchies that ultimately cause a superiority complex.²⁰

McFague argues that human dependence on nonhuman creation actually makes us more vulnerable.²¹ McFague wants humans to understand how dependent they are on nonhuman creation, which is a noble sentiment, but tell a baby pig being slammed to death on the floor of a factory farm, or a downed cow dragged into the slaughterhouse at the end of a chain, strung up by a leg and sliced from stem to stern, that the human hands perpetrating this violence are “vulnerable.” These beings are not empowered by such a hollow declaration.

Theological arguments made from a Native-American perspective provide some relief from the dependence on hierarchy and human-focused accounts of creation. Important to a Native American theological anthropology is the understanding of reciprocity. Nonhuman creation is not off-limits for human consumption and use, but such use must be carefully measured. When use requires harm (as in hunting, or cutting plants), the sacrifice must be honored by thoughtful preparation and a reciprocal offering.²² Unlike McFague, the worldview here is represented not by a ladder of hierarchy or a pyramid of privilege but a circle, in which human and nonhuman creatures are “co-equal participants in the circle standing neither above nor below anything else in God’s Creation. There is no hierarchy in our cultural context, even of species, because the circle has no beginning or ending.”²³

Humans apart from God are nothing, according to Karl Barth.²⁴ Native American theologians would add that humans apart from the whole of God’s creation are as much at risk as those cut off from God.²⁵ While Europeans and many Christians view themselves as outsiders in relation to creation, looking back on “Creation” as a finite divine act or standing over it to observe the results, the Native American intellectual tradition sees the created world as “alive and sentient as human beings are . . . we are related

20. *Ibid.*, 77.

21. McFague, *Body of God*, 106.

22. Kidwell et al., *Native American Theology*, 41–42.

23. *Ibid.*, 50. George Tinker is primarily responsible for the chapter in which I found this quote.

24. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 68.

25. Kidwell et al., *Native American Theology*, 40.

to all of these sentient persons in creation.”²⁶ The understanding of “persons” here is not reserved for a specific species, genus, family, or phylum of beings, but rather for every work of God’s hand, every member of the created kingdom, including those we have classified as plants and animals. Thus, a sacred ritual performed before war is virtually identical to the one performed by the community before embarking on a buffalo hunt.²⁷

Holistic Vision of the Human’s Role in Creation

Animals were not created for human ends, but for God’s. All of creation, from the tallest tree to the smallest insect, belongs to the Creator. “Coming in last place [in the creation story] should give us all pause for creaturely humility. We should realize that everything created was not made primarily for human happiness. Obviously, creation was enjoyed prior to our arrival.”²⁸ Yet we humans have placed ourselves at the center of the creation story. We remove ourselves from the symbiotic harmony of God’s creation.²⁹ For many years, I intentionally alienated myself from the truth about where animal foods came from in order to avoid feeling guilty about eating them.

When we embrace God’s commands in Genesis, and if we keep these commands in mind as we consider the whole biblical narrative, we can begin to develop an alternate vision for the human’s role in creation that does not rely on hierarchy but still recognizes the *imago Dei*. Humans are not little gods on earth. We are created “to be his image,”³⁰ a reality only fully realized in and through the person of Christ, our best understanding of being made in the image of God. And when we look at Jesus, we see mercy on a radical level. We see love and sacrifice. We see service.

Our dominion in creation is not one of paternalistic overseers (uncomfortably reminiscent of justifications for slavery), or even of siblings, but of servants. Christ calls us to love and to serve, and it is only through Christ that we are able to love and serve. But we do not love only our family, our friends. We do not love only our neighbors. We do not love only those who look like us, who share our political views, or who love us in return. Christ calls us to love our enemies. Christ calls us to love those we do not

26. *Ibid.*, 35.

27. *Ibid.*, 43.

28. Woodley, *Shalom*, 53.

29. *Ibid.*, 51.

30. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 218.

understand and do not appreciate. Christ calls us to love the leper. In our time, that must include the furry, the finned, and the feathered. In loving and serving others throughout the whole of the created community, we love and serve Christ.³¹

SAMPLE

31. Largen, "Christian Rationale," 155.