

The Slippery Semantics of a Word: "Dominion"

M.W. Fox

The word "dominion," which is interpreted by many as equivalent to "domination," is defined primarily (in Webster's dictionary) as indicating "sovereignty." *Roget's International Thesaurus* interprets dominion as "realm, domain or jurisdiction" and therefore makes "dominion," "domination," "sovereignty," and "supremacy" synonymous. Thus, the passage in Genesis 1:26 that proclaims that man has "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the

air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth," can be interpreted as meaning that he has been granted sovereignty, jurisdiction, or domination. The passage does not state, however, to what degree humans, as dominionists or sovereigns, may exploit the rest of creation: no ethical limits are set. Thus, the term "dominion" is ambiguous insofar as it does not denote to what degree humans, as dominionists or sovereigns, may

exploit the rest of creation. But in other parts of the Bible there are very clear injunctions to "dress and to keep" the earth, to treat animals humanely, and to rest beasts of burden on the Sabbath.

Therefore, while there is ambiguity in the use of the word "dominion" in the context of the Genesis passage, interpretation of "dominion" as domination or license to exploit animals — for whatever purpose — becomes impossible when the passage is placed beside the many injunctions in the Bible that advise us to treat animals with kindness; the idea of

domination can be seen as heretically and hubristically self-serving. In this edition of the *Journal*, J.A. Rimbach reviews Old Testament and post-biblical Jewish literature, which reveals clearly that the teaching of reverence for life is an integral part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Furthermore, evidence is clearly presented to show that any narrow interpretation of the word "dominion" as meaning "domination" is both incorrect and contrary to the essence of the Judeo-Christian tradition.
