

## Dominion mistranslated

*The “dominionists” are using a dubious translation of the Hebrew word yirdu.*

[Karl Grossman](#) / [NationofChange](#) / Op-Ed - February 6, 2019



*Image Credit: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images*

Those involved in what’s become a major component of the evangelical right in the United States call themselves “dominionists.” They follow “dominion theology.” Pointing to the Bible, they emphasize that in it God gave humans “dominion” over the natural world and life in it. This, they believe, gives them license to exploit the earth. Further, the “dominionists” have expanded this to justify theocratic rule of society.

It is an evangelical segment that Donald Trump has sought to attract. They constitute a significant portion of his so-called “base.”

And, as the just-published book, *The Shadow President: The Truth About Mike Pence*, by award-winning journalists and authors Michael D’Antonio and Peter Eisner, states: “For most of his life Pence had believed he was guided by God’s plan. He believed that the Lord intended for him to halt the

erosion of religious conviction in the United States. And though he avoided stating it himself, many of his evangelical friends believed Pence’s ultimate purpose was to establish a government based on biblical law. That was what they called Christian Dominionism.”

Thus arises a big wrinkle in the Trump situation. If Trump resigns is impeached or otherwise is no longer president and Pence replaces him, it could not only be a change of who is on top but a likely push for a different form of United States government.

As for their use of the word dominion, the “dominionists” are using a dubious translation of the Hebrew word *yirdu*. They take the name of their movement from Genesis and its passage relating how God said: “Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air.”

The Hebrew *yirdu* is what has been translated to dominion.

But, as Dr. David Ehrenfeld, professor of biology at Rutgers University, and Rabbi Philip J. Bentley, wrote in their essay “Judaism and the Practice of Stewardship,” there is an “inadequacy” of this translation. They quote Rashi, the French rabbi of a millennium ago and famous biblical commentator, as explaining, “The Hebrew [*yirdu*] connotes both ‘dominion’ (derived from *radah*) and ‘descent’ (derived from *yarad*): when man is worthy, he has dominion over the animal kingdom, when he is not, he descends below their level and the animals rule over him.”

“Here is a whole dimension of meaning which cannot be conveyed by an English translation,” Ehrenfeld and Bentley note.

Further, they cite context within Judaism – as Pope Francis did for both Judaism and Christianity in his encyclical on the environment of 2015.

Ehrenfeld and Bentley write, “There is no evidence, that we are aware of, that these verses of Genesis were ever interpreted by the rabbis as a license for environmental exploitation.” Indeed, “such an interpretation runs contrary to their teachings and to the whole spirit” of Jewish law. They cite numerous passages in the Bible regarding this. “There are, in Judaism, a number of specific rules – together constituting a kind of ‘Steward’s Manual’ – setting forth humanity’s particular responsibilities for its behavior toward natural resources, animals, and other parts of nature,” they relate.

“First among these rules is the commandment of *bal tashhit*” – Hebrew for do not destroy. They point to the Bible stating that “when thou shall besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shall not destroy” the fruit trees.

They write: “From this source is derived the notion of *bal tashhit* (do not destroy), an ancient and sweeping series of Jewish environmental regulations that embrace not only the limited case in question but have been rabbinically extended to a great range of transgressions including the cutting off of water supplies to trees, the over-grazing of the countryside, the unjustified killing of animals or feeding them harmful foods, the hunting of animals for sport, species extinction and destruction of cultivated plant varieties, pollution of air and water, over-

consumption of anything, and the waste of mineral and other resources.”

“It is also the Sabbath alone,” they write, “that can reconcile the Jewish attitude towards nature.” It’s a time that “we create nothing, we destroy nothing, and we enjoy the bounty of the earth. In this way the Sabbath becomes a celebration of our tenancy and stewardship in the world.” Then there is the Sabbatical year that comes every seven years when Jews are supposed to let land lie fallow to restore itself.

Rabbi Norman Lamm, longtime president of Yeshiva University, in his book *Faith and Doubt*, in a chapter “Ecology in Jewish Law and Theology,” writes about the Genesis “passage that, it is asserted, is the sanction for the excesses of science and technology, the new ecological villains.” It’s been “proclaimed” as “the source of man’s insensitivity and brutality to the subhuman world” and “equated with the right to foul the air.”

Rabbi Lamm says: “It does not take much scholarship to recognize the emptiness of this charge against the Bible, particularly as it is interpreted in the Jewish tradition.” Judaism on many levels, states Lamm, “possesses the values on which an ecological morality may be grounded.”

Pope Francis understands the “dominion” problem. In his 183-page encyclical devoted to “principles drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition which can render our commitment to the environment more coherent,” the pope wrote: “We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man ‘dominion’ over the earth, has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church.”

“The biblical texts are to be read in their context,” declares Pope Francis.

He speaks of Genesis telling “us to ‘till and keep’ the garden of the world. ‘Tilling’ refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence,

but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations.”

The pope cites the biblical admonition that “the earth is the Lord’s” and “to him belongs ‘the earth with all that is within it.’” He points to the words in Leviticus: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with me.”

“Now, faced as we are with global environmental deterioration, I wish to address every person living on this planet,” he wrote. “The worldwide ecological movement has already made considerable progress and led to the establishment of numerous organizations committed to raising awareness of these challenges. Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem, indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity.”

He addresses pollution produced by “dangerous waste...Each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from homes and businesses, from construction and demolition sites, from clinical, electronic and industrial sources. The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.”

“These problems,” the pope continues, “are closely linked to a throwaway culture.... We have not yet managed to adopt a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources, moderating their consumption, maximizing their efficient use, reusing and recycling them.”

“A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system. In recent decades, this warming has been accompanied by a constant rise in the sea level and, it would appear, by an increase of extreme weather events, even if a scientifically determinable cause cannot be assigned to each particular phenomenon.”

“The problem is aggravated by a model of development based on the intensive use of fossil

fuels, which is at the heart of the worldwide energy system,” he goes on. “Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political...It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day.”

The pope says: “There are too many special interests, and economic interests easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans will not be affected.” And “economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment.”

“Halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster,” he writes. “Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress. A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress.” The pope called for an “ecological conversion,” an environmental variant of what Jews refer to as *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

Nevertheless, the “dominionists” have a completely different view.

In his 2016 article “Dominionism Rising: A Theocratic Movement Hiding in Plain Sight,” published in *The Public Eye* magazine, Frederick Clarkson writes about the roots of “dominion theology,” notably the writings of theologian R. J. Rushdoony. He discusses Rushdoony’s 1973 “800-page *Institutes of Biblical Law*, which offered what he believed was a ‘foundation’ for a future biblically-based society, and his vision of generations of ‘dominion men’ advancing the ‘dominion mandate’ described in the biblical book of Genesis.”

He notes another theologian, C. Peter Wagner, and his 2008 book *Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World* in which Wagner states: “We have an assignment from God to take dominion and transform society.” And he cites a speech Wagner made that year declaring: “Dominion has to do with control. Dominion has to do with rulership. Dominion has to do with authority...and it relates to society. In other words, what the values are in heaven need to be made manifest here on earth. Dominion means being the head and not the tail. Dominion means ruling as kings.”

In *The Shadow President*, D'Antonio and Eisner detail how Trump picked Pence as his running mate largely to cement relations with evangelicals and hard-right conservatives, and also because of the sameness that Trump and Pence have on many issues.

“Humble superiority had been Pence’s default setting during his twelve years in Congress and four as Indiana’s governor, where his blending of religion and politics had alienated fellow Republicans, who noted he could be harsh in his treatment of his opponents and stubborn in his beliefs,” they write. “When Pence denied climate change or questioned the fact that smoking causes cancer, they saw unseemly and irrational arrogance. His disregard for science and other realms of expertise made him more like President Trump than many Americans understood.”

“Amid the churn and uncertainty” of the Trump presidency “Pence reassured many that should Trump leave office, someone with a steady temperament would be there. Although it was never stated openly, he was already functioning as a kind of shadow president, taking on so many domestic, foreign, and partisan political assignments that he seemed more engaged in serious matters than the TV-addicted president himself.”

They describe intense evangelical doings at The White House. They write about evangelist Ralph Drollinger “who imagines himself to be a prophet” and is “the leader of the Trump Cabinet’s weekly

prayer meetings, which Mike Pence attended with regularity.” They cite a comment of Drollinger in 2017 that the U.S. government’s “God-given responsibility” and “primary calling is to moralize a fallen world through the use of force.”

If Trump goes, does Pence have to succeed him?

Not so, wrote Professor Michael J. Glennon, law professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, in a just-out op-ed in *The Washington Post* headed, “If Trump is impeachable, so is Pence.”

The article explores the history of the process of impeachment of a U.S. president. Glennon writes: “Assume, hypothetically, that the upcoming report by special counsel Robert S. Mueller III, together with other evidence, were to establish conclusively that candidate Donald Trump engaged in electoral fraud or corruption by unlawfully coordinating his activities with the Russian government. Assume also that trump derived a decisive electoral benefit from that coordination. And assume that no probative evidence exists that Vice President Pence was aware of the coordination. Trump would be impeachable. But what about Pence, who himself would have committed no impeachable offense. The question can be argued either way, but the better view is that Pence, too, would be impeachable. The reason is that, had Trump not engaged in electoral fraud and corruption, Pence, like Trump, would not have been elected.”