

Genesis 1:25-31

The facilitator invites someone to read the biblical text aloud, and then asks the following question:

1. Listen to this text being read aloud. What picture comes to your mind as you listen to this text?

When the group has responded fully, the facilitator then asks the following question:

2. What words are used in verses 26 and 28 to describe the relationship between humans and the environment, and what kind of relationship do they seem to imply? Compare how different translations translate these verses.

When the group has responded fully, the facilitator then reads the following short input, and asks the group the question that follows:

In the Hebrew language the word usually translated as ‘to rule’ (‘radah’ in Hebrew) and the word usually translated as ‘to subdue’ or ‘to have dominion over’ (‘kabash’ in Hebrew) can have a very harsh meaning. Biblical scholars have reflected on these words (‘radah’ and ‘kabash’), wondering whether they can be understood in a different way. Some biblical scholars have argued that the words need not be understood here in their normal harsh sense. They suggest that because these words are associated with creatures (humans) who are made in the image of God, who is revealed here as creating and caring, these words might be understood to convey the notion of ‘to shepherd’ (‘radah’) and ‘to take possession of/to stand within’ (‘kabash’). The basic idea of this interpretation is that human beings are God’s representatives on earth, being located within the environment (‘standing within it’) and caring for it (‘shepherding it’).

Other biblical scholars point to a similar word in verse 16, ‘mashal’ (‘to rule’). Here is clear that the idea of ‘ruling’ or ‘governing’, repeated three times, is not meant in a harsh way. The sun and the moon are created “to give light on the earth”. They are made to do good to the earth and not damage (see verses 14-18). The basic idea of this interpretation is that human beings are ‘to rule’ in the same way as the sun and the moon ‘rule’.

Other scholars place this narrative in its ancient historical setting. They argue that the ancient Hebrews who wrote Genesis 1 were responding to ancient Babylonian creation stories. In the Babylonian stories of creation ‘the sun’ (‘shamash’) and ‘the moon’ (‘yareah’) were gods! So these biblical scholars suggest that Genesis 1 might be responding to and critiquing the Babylonian understanding. In Genesis 1 “the greater light” (‘the sun’) and “the lesser light” (‘the moon’) (verse 15) are clearly “made” (verse 16) by God, and they are certainly not gods. The main point of verses 26 and 28 according to these scholars is that it is humans who are ‘in control’ of the earth, under God, and not the Babylonian gods! The basic idea of this interpretation is that humans are agents, under no other gods, except God.

3. How does this information help us to understand the relationship between humans and the environment in Genesis 1:25-31?

When the group has responded fully, the facilitator then asks the following question:

4. What are the most common understandings of the relationship between humans and the environment in your local parish and community? In what ways are these common understandings helpful or harmful?

When the group has responded fully, the facilitator then introduces the following task:

5. In groups of two write a prayer that expresses what this Bible study has 'said' to you about the relationship between humans and the environment. Share these prayers in a time of prayer together.

When the group has responded fully, the facilitator then asks the following question:

6. What other practical things could we do to respond to this Bible study?