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RAIN ON A LAND WHERE NO ONE LIVES: THE HEBREW BIBLE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

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The natural environment, the world, has long been a problem for biblical interpretation. For many interpreters, from the earliest Christian centuries to the present day, the Hebrew Scriptures have endorsed a suspicion of nature. Justification for that viewpoint commonly is found in ancient Israel's tensions with the religions of its neighbors and its resistance to connecting natural forces or features with deities. Moreover, the emphasis on Israel's historical consciousness—especially in this century—all too often has been bought at the price of the Hebrew Bible's affection for the natural world. But is it possible that these scriptures reflect more appreciation of what we call nature than has been recognized?

I. Posing the Question

We may begin to frame the questions concerning the biblical perspective on the world in terms the 1967 article that initiated the modern debate, Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis."[1] This paper created a virtual cottage industry among biblical scholars[2] and theologians who set out to

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[1] Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967) 1203–7; reprinted in *Ecology and Religion in History* (ed. David Spring and Eileen Spring; New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 15–31.

[2] See, e.g., James Barr, "Man and Nature: The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament," in *Ecology and Religion in History* (ed. David Spring and Eileen Spring; New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 48–75; Gene M. Tucker, "Creation and the Limits of the World: Nature and History in the Old Testament," *HBT* 15 (1993) 105–18.

refute what they took to be the main claim of the article, that the rape of the earth had been authorized by the biblical injunction "to be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen 1:28).

White's article and the ensuing discussion call for three comments. First, on his most fundamental claim he was right on target. He said, "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion."[3] Thus, it is important for biblical scholars to take up the question of the biblical understanding of the environment. There is sufficient evidence— from the history of Western thought and from contemporary discourse on the environment—to show that the interpretation of the Bible is significant. Biblical interpretation has shaped contemporary beliefs, policies, and practices and will continue to do so. The only question is whether biblical scholars will contribute to that public conversation about public policy. Many of them have begun to participate in that discourse with a

[3] White, "Historical Roots," 23.

[4] Genesis 1:1–2:4a has been a major focus, partly in connection with the reactions to Lynn White's paper. There are somewhat dated general works such as Walther Zimmerli's *The Old Testament and the World* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976) and Odil Hannes Steck's *World and Environment* (1978; reprint, Nashville: Abingdon, 1980). Bernhard Anderson has written or edited several volumes on the theme of creation (*Creation in the Old Testament* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984]; *Creation versus Chaos: The Reinterpretation of Mythical Symbolism in the Bible* [New York: Association Press, 1967]; *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* [OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994]), and there is the recent collection of essays on the same theme edited by Richard J. Clifford and John J. Collins, *Creation in the Biblical Traditions* (CBQMS 24; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1992). James Limburg has been particularly active ("Down-to-earth Theology: Psalm 104 and the Environment," *CurTM* 21 [1994] 340–46; "The Responsibility of Royalty: Genesis 1–11 and the Care of the Earth," *WW* 11 [Spring 1991] 124–30; "Who Cares for the Earth? Psalm Eight and the Environment," in *All Things New: Essays in Honor of Roy A. Harrisville* [ed. Arland J. Hultgren, Donald H. Juel, and Jack D. Kingsbury; Word & World Supplement Series 1; St. Paul: Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 1992] 43–52), and Terence Fretheim has reinterpreted the structure of the Pentateuch in terms of creation ("'Because the Whole Earth is Mine,'" *Int* 50 [1996] 229–39; "The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster," *JBL* 110 [1991] 385–96; and *The Pentateuch* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1996]). Walter Brueggemann's *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) was a significant contribution to the discussion, and the first fruit of Norman Habel's major project on land and justice has just appeared (*The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995]). A recent issue of *Interpretation* (January 1996) was devoted to the topic. One of the most sophisticated and significant modern works on the issues of this paper appeared just this year. It is Theodore Hiebert's *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). An excellent treatment of the subject is Ronald A. Simkins, *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

modest but growing body of research on aspects the natural world in the Hebrew Bible.[4] Nevertheless, it is evident that there is a great deal of work to do before we can understand the Hebrew Bible's perspectives on the natural environment. Our goal here is to suggest some of those voices that should be heard.

Second, many biblical scholars misread an important point in White's argument. For him it was not so much the biblical text as the history of its interpretation in the Christian West that formed the historical roots of the ecological crisis. As Clarance Glacken demonstrates in his monumental study *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century,* "The intense otherworldliness and rejection of the beauties of nature because they turn men away from the contemplation of God are elaborated upon far more in theological writings than in the Bible itself."[5]

Third, the debate over the roots of the ecological crisis focused on whether the Bible authorized environmental despotism or stewardship of the world. The answer is not self-evident. Both history and contemporary rhetoric show that it is possible to read "subdue it . . . have dominion" as license to exploit. Certainly the issues are far more complex than such a question suggests. Furthermore, those two alternatives rest on a common foundation, the assumption that humanity stands over the world. Recognition of that common ground moves the debate to a different and also more problematic level. In the tone of accusation, many have observed that "the biblical concept of nature is strongly anthropomorphic."[6] Is that the case, and if so, what are its implications?

One could hardly expect to resolve the question of the meaning of the world—even the world according to the Bible—in a single presentation. So we propose to take up here some aspects of one issue that seems fundamental to all others, the biblical understanding of the relationship between what we call nature and what we call culture. There are problems inherent in these cate-

[5] Clarance Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) 151. Elaine Pagels shows how the interpretation of Genesis 1–3 in the early Christian church fashioned so many of the fundamental perspectives that persist into the modern world: "What I intend to show in this book is how certain ideas—in particular, ideas concerning sexuality, moral freedom, and human value—took their definitive form during the first four centuries as interpretations of the Genesis creation stories, and how they have continued to affect our culture and everyone in it, Christian or not, ever since" (*Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* [New York: Vintage Books, 1988] xxviii). She could have made the same point about major aspects of the worldview, the question of the status of the natural world, and particularly the relationship between human beings and the rest of the created order.

[6] Jeanne Kay, "Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible," *Environmental Ethics* 10 (1988) 313.

gories, not least of which is the fact that neither is a biblical concept as such. Moreover, this dichotomy between the world created by human invention and society (culture), and the world before or outside of or unmodified by human activity (nature) may turn out to be false or misleading.[7] Nevertheless, asking about the relationship between nature and culture is a useful way of posing a central question: What, according to the Hebrew Bible, is the place of human beings in the natural order? Or, to use language that is more indigenous to the biblical tradition, what is the relationship of humanity to the rest of creation? This is the question we shall pose to a range of key texts.

Even with a limited number of texts in view, it would be unrealistic to expect a single vision of the world. There is a wide range of perspectives on the value of the natural world and of humanity's place in it—and how could it be otherwise given the long tradition represented as well as the different social locations of the authors, editors, and audiences? Are there dominant themes and perspectives on this issue? What are the points of tension and conflict, the basis for negative as well as positive interpretations of the world?

There are indeed difficulties with some of the biblical perspectives, and these should neither be ignored nor swept under the rug. Nevertheless, the Bible provides rich resources for considering these issues. Even in rejecting some of its alternatives, the issues—and the roots of some contemporary problems—may become more clear. Moreover, some of the biblical perspectives might provide a basis for rethinking the relationship of humanity to the world.

II. Creation: Genesis 1–3

We begin with Genesis 1–3. Although the creation accounts of the Priestly Writer and the Yahwist, different as they are on our question, do not represent the only biblical views, the scriptures persistently address the question of the world and the place of human beings in it in the language of creation. Moreover, few texts address our question more directly or focus it more clearly.

On many aspects of the interpretation of the key text in the Priestly account there is widespread consensus, at least among biblical scholars. The divine speech to the first human pair on the sixth day (1:28–29) is not a commandment but a blessing. Given both the biblical and the wider ancient Near Eastern context, human beings are created as royal stewards of a good creation. To be identified as "image of God" entails both the freedom and the responsi-

[7] The cautions on this point by recent thinkers are legitimate and well placed. See Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); idem, "A Problem for Theology: The Concept of Nature," *HTR* 65 (1972) 337–66. See also Theodore Hiebert, "Re-Imaging Nature: Shifts in Biblical Interrelation," *Int* 50 (1996) 36–46. The dichotomy itself is an invention, but as Glacken has shown, it is an ancient and powerful invention. Moreover, like all language, the dichotomy has some basis in human experience. Certainly one can employ categories without necessarily capitulating to them.

bility to act on God's behalf, consistent with that God's will, which will is the good of the creation.[8]

There are subtle distinctions in these two verses, and some are resolved more easily than others. Human "dominion" is specifically over the fish, the birds, and "every living thing that moves upon the earth" (1:28), but not over the earth itself. More problematic is the commission to "subdue" the earth. Although the context qualifies and softens the force of this expression, it is a strong and potentially violent verb, referring to "trampling under one's feet" in "absolute subjugation."[9] So "have dominion" and "subdue," particularly when read out of context, can give aid and comfort to a despotic interpretation of the human relation to the rest of the world.

Moreover, this account of creation, and especially of the creation and blessing of humanity, plainly establishes a hierarchy. First there is God, transcendent over all creation; second, there is the deity's steward over, third, the rest of the world. Although like other beings, living or not, human beings are creatures, they are the pinnacle of the pyramid, able to view the rest of the world at some distance.[10]

But other features of the Priestly account should be noted. This story presents a comprehensive and cosmic perspective on the world, reflecting both curiosity about it and love of it. The writer describes the world as far as the eye can see, and beyond. This world includes not just space but time as well, the latter understood not fundamentally as one thinks of history but as the transition from darkness to light to darkness again and the passage of the seasons in their cycles. In short, the "natural" passages of time are as obvious and important as the landscape, and as visible as the lights in the sky. In fact, doubtless because of concerns with the cult, the Priestly Writer expresses here a "cyclical" understanding of time linked to the agricultural year, thus to the fruitfulness of the earth.

Closely related to this point is the centrality of the sabbath, the conviction that the whole creation—and the Creator as well—needs rest, relief, from all labor. This is a significant qualification of the commissions to humanity and serves as foundation for the sabbath year. Moreover, the Priestly understanding of the sabbath is distinctly not anthropocentric, but built into the very structure of creation.

[8] Tucker, "Creation and the Limits of the World," 116–17. Kay concludes: "The biblical theme of humans created in the divine image . . . also relates to humanity's conditional dominion over nature" ("Concepts of Nature," 318). Although this dominion is made conditional elsewhere, that is not explicit in Genesis 1.

[9] Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 60. He cites Jer 34:11–16; Zech 9:15; Neh 5:5; and 2 Chr 28:10 as examples. See Barr, "Man and Nature," 63ff. on these key expressions.

[10] "The Bible's discrete distinctions between God, nature, and humanity form a core of current scholarly thought on biblical attitudes toward nature" (Kay, "Concepts of Nature," 313).

Finally, and most important, the central affirmation of this account is the refrain that echoes throughout it: "And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good" (1:31).

Although in some respects the Yahwistic perspective in Genesis 2–3 parallels that of P, the differences on our question are more significant. An excellent point of departure is Theodore Hiebert's careful exploration of the Yahwist's understanding of the environment. He shows—contrary to the general consensus—that the Yahwistic narrative and the traditions it embodies do not stem from the desert but reflect the mixed agricultural economy of the central Judean hill country.[11] Moreover, Hiebert demonstrates how the thought of the Yahwist—and presumably of the communities where it originated and was transmitted—is deeply connected with the natural order, from its fundamental convictions about the relationship of human life to the rest of that order, to the activities of the deity, to the agricultural patterns of its ritual calendar.

A major key to this interpretation of the Yahwist is Gen 2:5b: "For the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth (הָאָרֶץ), and there was no one (אָדָם) to till the ground (הָאֲדָמָה)." The account of the world before the Lord's creative action reveals the interdependence of the earth, humanity, and the deity. Hiebert argues convincingly that in J אֲדָמָה is a technical term for arable land.[12] The role of human beings is to serve the land, turning it into that which can support life, and God's role is to provide the rain. These two, argues Hiebert, are "the most fundamental facts of existence, the absence of which signify the state of the world before creation."[13]

Another critical verse that emphasizes the integral relationship of humanity to the world is Gen 2:7: "Then the Lord God formed man (אָדָם) from the dust of the ground (אֲדָמָה) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. . . ." The human being is made from the soil and to it shall return (3:19). But the identification with other life is emphasized as well. All living creatures are formed from the ground, and both the human being and the other living creatures are viable because they have the same "breath of life."[14] So human beings are both in and of the world in the sense of physical reality as well as role or function.

[11] Hiebert, *Yahwist's Landscape*, 61, 97, passim.

[12] Ibid., 34. "As that from which all life is derived—plant, animal, human—arable soil is the key to the Yahwist's conception of the structure and essential character of the natural world" (p. 63). "In summary, J views the world of nature as a single metaphysical reality, the central and defining feature of which is *ʾădāmâ* arable land. Nature's constituent parts, the earth and soil and its various forms of life—plant, animal, human—are distinct features of the same organic system, sharing a common essence derived from the soil" (p. 65).

[13] Ibid., 72.

[14] See Hiebert, *Yahwist's Landscape*, 60; and J. Baird Callicott, "Genesis and John Muir," in *Covenant for a New Creation: Ethics, Religion, and Public Policy* (ed. Carol S. Robb and Carl J. Casebolt; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 107–40. Callicott argues that John Muir had a third reading of Genesis, that human beings were to be citizens of the world.

But even in the Yahwist's narrative there are limits to the identification of human beings with the rest of the world. Although not a royal steward between God and the (rest of the) world, this creature stands in parallel to God. The Lord God and אָדָם work together to transform the environment into the real world. Moreover, who can doubt that the human beings, their lives and their troubles, are the central subject of Gen 2:4b–3:24?

A far more troubling point comes in 3:17, when the ground itself (הָאֲדָמָה) is cursed because of the sin of the first human pair. Thus, one of the results of disobedience is the estrangement of humanity from nature, even from that life-giving arable soil. At the very least, the relationship between humanity and world becomes ambiguous. This opens the biblical theme of the connection between human morality and the fate of the created order, expressed in the prophets and elsewhere.

The view that the fall produced a permanent corruption of the land profoundly influenced ideas of the earth through most of the Christian era in the West.[15] Again, this interpretation failed to consider the fuller context. Hiebert has argued that in the Yahwistic account the turning point is the flood, followed by the renewal of the natural order, and Fretheim has shown that there are strong themes of the renewal of creation throughout the Pentateuch.[16]

III. Culture Over Nature

In three areas the biblical affirmation of the goodness of creation is threatened by ideas or assumptions about the relationship between the natural world and human culture. There is a tendency in some traditions to identify culture—and specific forms of culture—with the world, to think of the world shaped by human society as natural, the way the world has always been. These three are the land, animals, and the destiny of the world.

The issue of the land and the landscape arises in the Yahwist. For all its compelling recognition of humanity as within and not beyond the natural order, the Yahwistic perspective is problematic. As Hiebert points out, for J, "arable soil . . . [is] the standard in relation to which other types of environmental regimes are evaluated."[17] Creation, with God providing the rain and the man

[15] "The idea . . . that the fall of man had also caused a deterioration in nature influenced conceptions of the nature of the earth, at least until the end of the seventeenth century. This deterioration and the toil required after the Fall to induce productivity in the soil were the counterpart in the physical world of evil in the moral world" (Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore,* 164).

[16] Hiebert, *Yahwist's Landscape,* 80–82 (the sense of renewal is even stronger in P); Fretheim, *Pentateuch.*

[17] Hiebert, *Yahwist's Landscape,* 65. "Within inhabitable space, the arable soil, as the basis for all life, holds a kind of fundamental and indispensable position in the order of things" (ibid).

providing the labor, amounts to the transformation of the earth into arable land which can support life.[18]

But what about "nonarable" land—the desert, the fringe? The Yahwist's world is cultivated land. Not only in the Yahwist but throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the desert is dreadful and dangerous, a wasteland.[19] Actually, much of what is identified as wilderness was seasonal pasture land,[20] and all of it, even the most barren and arid, supported life, including human life. But "desert" and "wilderness" are virtually ideological categories that refer to what lies beyond the cultured, and—as in the modern West—the ideas are more important than the geographical realities. Whether it was there or not, it was strongly believed that there was a line in the sand.

The eyes that see the world in the Yahwistic narrative and many other texts are those of the farmer and the shepherd. This view has depth, but it also has limitations. The farmer is, indeed, close to the earth both literally and symbolically, but life is by no means limited to the agrarian realm. That culture comes to equal nature is not necessarily destructive, since human beings are viewed realistically as an integral part of the natural world.

The perspective on animals is similar to that concerning the land. Genesis 1 reflects some rudimentary classifications of animals, particularly in terms of the spheres in which they live: water, sky, and land. The author also distinguishes between wild and domestic animals (1:24–25), but assumes that God created all of them at the beginning, unaware of the effects of human culture on life as well as land. In fact, domestic animals are human artifacts, the products of human activity over time.

The sense of the domestication of animals in the garden is somewhat greater in the Yahwist. They are created as helpers for the first man and he names all of them (Gen 2:18–20).[21]

Most of the animals that move through the pages of the Bible are domestic: sheep, goats, cattle, donkeys, and oxen, those genuine helpers of humanity that provide food, clothing, and assistance in cultivation. They are not only benign but helpful. However, there is abundant evidence for tension between animals, mainly wild animals, and human society. On the one hand there is the transformation in the relationship in the covenant with Noah, whose generation is told: "The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and

[18] Similar views are expressed in Isa 45:18, where God is said to have "formed the earth . . . to be inhabited," and Ps 115:16, where the heavens are the Lord's "but the earth he has given to human beings."

[19] Hiebert, *Yahwist's Landscape*, 39, 65. The seas and the waters also are seen as dangerous. See Louis I. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World* (AnBib 39; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970) 18, and the texts cited there.

[20] Kay, "Concepts of Nature," 312.

[21] See Hiebert, *Yahwist's Landscape*, 60. However, to the extent that there is an awareness of domestication it applies to all living creatures.

on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea . . . every moving thing that lives shall be food for you" (Gen 9:2–3). This "fear" does not stem from human "dominion" in a comprehensive sense, nor from the human power to destroy the earth and/or particular species. Rather, Noah's descendants are feared as predators, the top of the food chain.[22]

The other side of the relationship is the human fear of wild animals. One of the Lord's rewards for obedience is that "you shall lie down and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land and no sword shall go through the land" (Lev 26:6). The sense that wild animals are beyond the fringe, corresponding to the relationship of the wilderness to the cultivated land, is expressed in the young David's boast to Saul: "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down . . . I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it" (1 Sam 17:34–35). It is a valiant warrior who kills the lion or bear (2 Sam 23:20).

To be sure, the lion, the bear, and the eagle are symbols for strength, courage, and freedom (2 Sam 17:10; Prov 30:18–19, 30–31; Isa 40:31; etc.),[23] but for the most part they symbolize danger and destruction:

> The lion has roared;
> who will not fear?" (Amos 3:8; cf. 3:12)
>
> as if someone fled from a lion,
> and was met by a bear;
> or went into a house and rested a hand against a wall,
> and was bitten by a snake." (Amos 5:19)

Third, and perhaps most problematic of all are visions of the future that eventually develop into apocalyptic eschatology. This includes some of the most powerful and revered poetry of the Bible, such as Isa 11:6–9.

> The wolf shall live with the lamb,
> the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
> the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
> and a little child shall lead them. . . .
> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
> and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

In the context of the announcement of a new Davidic king (11:1–5), these verses proclaim a transformation in the natural, cosmic sphere. Natural enemies in the animal world will live together in peace, even changing their diets.

[22] To be sure, the deep sense of the sacredness of all life is reflected in the prohibition against eating meat with the blood, that is, the life.

[23] Kay, "Concepts of Nature," 325.

On the one hand, as so frequently in the prophetic literature, the poem stresses the relationship between justice, mercy, peace, and harmony in the natural order (cf. also Hos 1:18 and Ezek 34:25). Who does not long for a world without fear and violence? But on the other hand, the lines suggest that the world may have been created good, even very good, but not quite good enough. The text presumes a negative evaluation of the world as it is, filled with predators and prey, violence and death. One message of the passage, to put it bluntly, is that there will come a time when the world will be made safe for domestic animals and for children.

It is a serious problem for the affirmation of a good creation. Such visions, wonderful as they are, when linked with the sense of a fallen humanity and an earth that is cursed, pave the way for the apocalyptic rejection of this world as it is. So, does creation need to be redeemed?[24]

IV. Human Limits

No anthropocentric perspective goes unchallenged or unchastened in the biblical tradition. Both the Pentateuch and the prophetic corpus are filled with restrictions on the human use of the natural world. Some concerns move in the direction of conservation, such as the charming instruction in Deut 22:6: "If you come on a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs, with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young." Even in times of urgent need in warfare no one is allowed to decimate a forest: "If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?" (Deut 20:19).[25] Among the reasons for punishment of Sennacherib was his arrogance in felling the tallest cedars and choicest cypresses of Lebanon (2 Kgs 19:23–24).[26]

Other texts concern the possibility of ecological disaster because of human activity. Hosea 4:1–3 is the classic example. A striking sequence of events is set out in these verses.

> There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
> and no knowledge of God in the land;

[24] Holmes Rolston III, "Does Nature Need to be Redeemed?" *HBT* 14 (1992) 143–72; W. Sibley Towner, "The Future of Nature," *Int* 50 (1996) 27–35.

[25] To be sure, the following verse allows the destruction of "trees that you know do not produce food" to build siegeworks.

[26] Kay gives examples of the punishment of human beings for destruction of the environment and concludes: "In the Bible, premeditated decimation of nature is not man's prerogative, but God's" ("Concepts of Nature," 319).

Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.
Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish,
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing.

The continuity of events, which is a sequence of cause and effect, makes it difficult to distinguish between sin and "judgment." First there is the human failure of commitment and faithfulness to God at the deepest level. The effect of that failure is specific crimes against the neighbor, resulting in bloody violence. As a result, the earth and all of its inhabitants—human beings as well as creatures of field, air, and sea—languish and finally disappear. The whole cosmos suffers from the effects of human sinfulness.[27] This prophetic address clearly presumes an anthropocentric view, that human beings have the power—but not the authority—to disrupt and even destroy the rest of creation.

The most forceful and compelling critique of the idea that humanity is the pinnacle of the natural order appears in the Lord's address in Job 38–39. The speech begins abruptly in 38:1 with the voice out of the "tempest" (cf. 1 Kgs 19:11 and again in Job 40:6). Beginning with 38:2 the Lord addresses Job in the style of ironic, even sarcastic, rhetorical questions. The tone is a curious combination of the sardonic address with allusions to the joy and laughter of the world's creatures.[28] This is hardly the occasion to resolve the question of the meaning of the book of Job, but one could say that a major goal of this address is to clarify the limits of Job's [and of humanity's] knowledge, wisdom, and control of the world. A central theme is God's design (עֵצָה, 38:2),[29] which includes both care for and limits upon all aspects of creation.[30]

The contents and structure of 38:4–39:30 may be characterized in more than one way. On the one hand, the address begins with the acts of creation (38:4–27) and then moves to the continuing "natural" wonders; that is, from past tense ("where were you?") to the present tense ("can you?" "who can?").

[27] H. W. Wolff, *Hosea* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 68. See also Patrick D. Miller, *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets: A Stylistic and Theological Analysis* (SBLMS 27; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982) 9–11; and Gene M. Tucker, "Sin and 'Judgment' in the Prophets," forthcoming in a volume to be published in 1996.

[28] See James L. Crenshaw, "When Form and Content Clash: The Theology of Job 38:1–40:5," in *Creation in the Biblical Traditions* (ed. R. J. Clifford and J. J. Collins; CBQMS 24; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1992) 70–84.

[29] See Norman Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 530.

[30] See esp. Carol A. Newsom, "The Moral Sense of Nature: Ethics in the Light of God's Speech to Job," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 15/1 (1994) 20; see also eadem, "Job," in *The New Interpreters' Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 4.597, 603.

On the other hand, it moves from the nonliving (38:3–38) to the living wonders of the world (38:39–40:30). The topics are cosmogony, meteorology, zoology.

The vision of the cosmos here is even wider than that of the Priestly Writer in Genesis 1, and the breadth and diversity of the landscape far beyond that of the Yahwist. The vista is not just the arable land, or the terrain of the familiar central hill country, but all the world. Moreover, the created order is not just productive land worked to satisfy human hunger, but all the earth that benefits from the Lord's care. It is the Lord who

> cut a channel for the torrents of rain,
> and a way for the thunderbolt,
> to bring rain on a land where no one lives,
> on the desert, which is empty of human life. (38:25–26)

God brings rain not only on the just and the unjust, but on the desert as well as the sown land. The wilderness is—quite literally—not Godforsaken. These lines bring a very important voice into the conversation about the environment and respond to what is all too commonly viewed as the main line of the Bible's understanding. The notion that all creation is to serve human interests is rejected.

The section concerning the animals advances the same view. All of them are wild, undomesticated, uncultured: lion, raven, mountain goat, wild ass, wild ox, ostrich, hawk, and eagle. One might consider the war horse (39:19–25) an exception, but that is hardly the case. The chariot stallion was at most semi-domesticated, always on the edge of control, and celebrated in these lines for his fearlessness, rage, and exuberance in battle.

The point is that while human beings *can* control domesticated animals, which are human artifacts, these wild creatures are beyond human authority or understanding. As Othmar Keel has shown, in the ancient Near Eastern context these creatures represent what lies beyond the bounds of human culture and symbolic order.[31] But, unlike virtually all other characterizations in the biblical as well as other ancient Near Eastern traditions, this text does not depict the wild animals as hostile forces. In fact, the Lord cares for them and invites Job to join in celebrating their presence in the world.

God has set the wild ass (39:5–8) "free from the clutches of human society and its compulsion to domesticate."[32] Likewise the soaring hawk represents both freedom and the limits of human wisdom (39:26). The Lord, like a hunter, provides prey for both the raven (cf. Ps 147:9) and the lion, along with their young: "Can you hunt prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions?" (38:39) That is, as God can?

[31] Othmar Keel, *Jahwes Entgegnung an Ijob: Eine Deutung von Ijob 38–41 vor dem Hintergrund der zeitgenössischen Bildkunst* (FRLANT 121; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978). See the summary by Newsom, "Moral Sense of Nature," 22.

[32] Habel, *Book of Job*, 545.

The concluding line concerning the eagle alludes to a battlefield,[33] and certainly puts human beings in their place:

> Its [the eagle's] young ones suck up blood;
> where the slain are, there it is.

What is the place of human beings in the natural order? They could be food for eagles, carrion.

With regard to our questions about the relation of humanity to the rest of creation, the answer of Job 38–39 is clear enough. Although the first divine speech is not a direct critique of the commission to have dominion,[34] it explicitly challenges the human instinct to control, especially to domesticate. Humanity does not understand all things, nor manage them, but God does.[35] Moreover, the poem not only acknowledges and affirms but also celebrates the world as it is; that is, the world as observed by the ancient poet and his contemporaries. All creatures—including both predators and prey—have their place. Furthermore, all places—including barren lands—have their place. The role of human beings is not addressed explicitly, but that does not mean they do not belong. After all, the Lord is—finally—addressing Job.[36]

If in Job 38–39 the Lord speaks to Job, and humanity is present only as the one addressed, in Psalm 104 human beings speak to God, and their place in creation is treated explicitly. This song, in some respects parallel to both Genesis 1 and Job 38–40, praises God as creator and sustainer of the world and all that dwell therein. It is remarkably sensual, filled with delightful sights and sounds, including the song of the birds. It mentions feelings of all kinds, especially pleasure: "The earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work" (v. 13); "to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart" (vv. 14–15). There is a distinctly aesthetic dimension to creation, evoking pleasure in what one sees, hears, feels, and tastes.

The attitude toward wild animals is similar to that in Job 38–39. "The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God" (v. 21). Even lions, the psalmist acknowledges, have to make a living. Both here and in Job predators are shown taking care of their young, making it far more difficult to demonize the (potentially) dangerous animals.

This hymn takes in all living things and the divine gifts that sustain them, including water, food, shelter, and appropriate times. There is water for every wild animal (v. 11) and trees as habitat for the birds (v. 12). God "causes grass to

[33] חֲלָלִים clearly refers to the bodies of the dead, in this case evoking the image of the battlefield (see Habel, *Book of Job,* 548).

[34] J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 240.

[35] See Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation, and Special Studies* (Moreshet Series 2; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978) 435. See also Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore,* 156.

[36] Janzen, *Job,* 229.

grow for the cattle"—that is, for domestic animals—and domestic "plants for people to cultivate" (v. 14).

Human beings, as one species among all the others, are sustained by and enjoy the gifts of God (vv. 14–15, 26). Neither in terms of the form nor the contents of this song are they singled out.[37] All creatures have their times, marked by the sun and moon. The lions hunt at night, but retreat to their dens at sunrise, when people go out to work until evening (vv. 19–23). Moreover, when it looks to the sea (v. 26), the hymn expresses wonder both at the results of technology (ships) and the creatures beyond the bounds of culture (Leviathan).

The limits of life are treated in a particularly matter-of-fact way (vv. 27–30). All living things depend upon God for life, for their "food in due season." But God also "hides" God's face and they are dismayed: "when you take away their breath, they die." However, that is not the end, at least not for creation.

> When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
> and you renew the face of the ground. (v. 30)

Is this renewal, as usually understood, by means of the divine spirit, or—more literally—with the bodies of the dead? That is, God renews the face of the ground with the dust that returns to dust. They are created out of the dust of the ground, and given life. In any case, the continuing cycle of renewal is a gift of God.[38] This is a sober and realistic acceptance of the world as it is.

V. Conclusions

Where does this review lead us with regard to our question concerning the biblical understanding of the place of humanity in the world? Like all biblical interpretation, it leads to both problems and possibilities. First, although there are significant and even conflicting views on important issues—the vision of Isaiah 11 is not easily reconciled with Job 38–39 or Psalm 104—there are some common points of departure. All of the Hebrew traditions assume that human beings, who are both in and of the world, have a distinctive place in creation. Even in the texts that emphasize the identification of humanity with the rest of the world, and where a hierarchical structure seems under fire, human beings are the ones addressed by God (Job) or speak to God (Psalm 104).

Consistently, this special human role emphasizes responsibilities and not rights. Even those words of Psalm 8, which have tended to elevate human self-understanding, are set in the context of awe before creation and acknowledgment of human frailty. The Psalm articulates that tension in human experience between realizing one's limitations in the world and knowing one's power and

[37] James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 334.

[38] There is "a recognition of the absolute dependence of all creatures upon the LORD for food (vv. 27–28) and for life itself (vv. 29–30)" (Mays, *Psalms*, 335).

authority.[39] Both the starry heavens above and human responsibility are awesome.

This biblical affirmation of human dominion is—to speak normatively—realistic, consistent with both ancient and modern experience. It is true that the human race has the power to mold and change the environment. That itself is not so remarkable, for "all forms of life modify their contexts."[40] Consequently, to deny that power and its concomitant responsibility and withdraw—or attempt to—is as dangerous as overreaching one's authority. So the biblical tradition emphasizes both responsibility and the limits of authority.

Finally, and not as an afterthought but as an invitation to consider the next question, we must call attention to what every single text has made plain: The biblical world view is not so much anthropocentric as theocentric. That is why it speaks of creation and not nature. For all its deep appreciation of the natural environment, neither Psalm 104 nor Job 38–39 is nature poetry. The world is good because it is God's creation, not because it is divine. This God is seen to be active in but distinct from the world. To be sure, the biblical God of creation is no less difficult to comprehend than the God who acts in history, for the one who brings the rain is believed to be responsible for withholding it, or for sending too much. Nevertheless, the question of the ultimate origin, meaning, and destiny of the world deserves to be considered, even in public discourse about the environment.[41] And that may be the most difficult challenge of all.

[39] "To look is to experience finitude and transience. We exist in a universe that does not notice or care about us. To be human is to be afflicted with the capacity for this subliminal glimpse of the significance of our insignificance, to live constantly on the edge of consternation before the cosmos" (James L. Mays, "What is a Human Being? Reflections on Psalm 8," *TToday* 50 [1994] 514).

[40] White, "Historical Roots," 16.

[41] "I would say that the great modern exploitation of nature has taken place under the reign of a liberal humanism in which man no longer conceives of himself as being under a creator, and in which therefore his place of dominance in the universe and his right to dispose of nature for his own ends is, unlike the situation in the Bible, unlimited" (Barr, "Man and Nature," 73).