

## The Bible and anthropocentrism: putting humans in their place

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**Abstract** Can religion contribute to a better, more ecologically balanced treatment of the environment? Since a seminal essay by Lynn White, this question has often been answered in the negative. There he exposed the dominant anthropocentric reading of the biblical tradition that has characterized the worldview of Western Christianity. This worldview provided the conditions for human exploitation of the environment. This paper will challenge the common anthropocentric reading of the Bible, arguing instead that the Bible is the product of a theocentric worldview. Humans may be singled out in the Bible for particular attention, but they are not separated out from the natural world in which they live. In the theocentric worldview of the Bible, humans and all other creatures are dependent upon God for creation and subsistence, and all alike are valuable to God as part of his creation. The world, inclusive of humans and animals, trees and plants, land and seas, belongs to God because it is God's creation, and it is in relation to God that each part of creation has its value and worth. A non-anthropocentric reading of the Bible—putting humans in their place—provides an appropriate framework for valuing the natural world, not simply as resources for human use, but rather as the creation of God.

**Keywords** Anthropocentrism · Bible · Lynn White, Jr. · Environment · Theocentrism

### Introduction

When Lynn White, in his seminal essay of 1967, critiqued the impact of the “Judeo-Christian” tradition on the environment, he laid the foundation of his argument on

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the dominant Western Christian reading of Genesis 1, where humans, as the culmination of God's creation, are created in God's image. From this privileged position, humans are commanded to exercise dominion over all of nature, which God gave to them for their benefit. According to this reading, "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes" (1967: 1205). White argued that this anthropocentric reading of the biblical creation, in contrast to the alternative Greco-Roman mythology, placed humans at the center of creation, separated humans from nature, and "insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (1967: 1205). According to White, this reading of the biblical creation was part and parcel of a medieval Latin worldview that demythologized nature and gave rise to technological exploitations of the natural world and eventually to science. Nature had become a mere object that could be exploited with indifference. Because of this worldview, White singled out Christianity, especially in its Western form, as "the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen" (1967: 1205), and claimed that it is Christian anthropocentrism in particular that provided the conditions for human exploitation of the environment.

Lynn White's essay has had an enormous influence on framing the relationship between religion and the environment and on formulating environmental ethics (Minter and Manning 2005; Jenkins 2009). His critique of Western Christian anthropocentrism has often been accepted, even by those who are otherwise critical of his historical interpretations or causal connections. To combat the dominant anthropocentric worldview of the Western Christian tradition, White famously championed the alternative worldview of St. Francis of Assisi, which dethroned humankind from over creation in favor of the shared community of all God's creatures. Many, following White's lead, have thus emphasized non-anthropocentric alternatives that uphold the intrinsic value of nature (see the many examples discussed by Taylor 2010), whereas others have instead sought to construct a revised anthropocentrism that is not exploitative of the environment (see Norton 1984; Hargrove 1992). In either case, anthropocentrism has become a contested issue in environmental discussions.

White's characterization of Western Christianity, at least some of its manifestations, is not far off the mark. In two recent messages celebrating the World Day of Peace (2007, 2009b) and in the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009a), Pope Benedict XVI brought environmental issues to the forefront of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching, and he did so in a thoroughly anthropocentric way. Drawing on the same biblical tradition that White highlights, Genesis 1 and 2, and the affirmation of humans in Psalm 8, Benedict emphasized that humans are created in the "image of God," that the natural world is given to humankind by God, and that nature is subject to human use. Although Benedict tempers this anthropocentrism by underscoring human responsibilities toward the environment and that the environment belongs to all humans and to future generations—seemingly mitigating White's critique of the anthropocentrism of Western Christianity—White's critique is aimed, not at this or that particular value that may characterize anthropocentrism, but at anthropocentrism's fundamental separation of humans from nature. Indeed, it is this separation that Benedict is intent on upholding: "If the Church's magisterium

expresses grave misgivings about notions of the environment inspired by ecocentrism and biocentrism, it is because such notions eliminate the difference of identity and worth between the human person and other living things ... such notions end up abolishing the distinctiveness and superior role of human beings” (2009b: 13; Ruether 2011, in contrast, argues that the separation of humans and nature is unbiblical; see also Simkins 1994).

Benedict’s anthropocentrism would appear to validate White’s critique of Western Christianity, especially since Benedict also roots his anthropocentrism in the biblical tradition. But many other Christian thinkers, who also are steeped in the biblical tradition, reject anthropocentrism and do so in accord with that tradition (see, e.g., Rolston 1996; Berry 1993).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, St. Francis’ own biocentrism (Mizzoni 2008), which White held up as a remedy to Western Christianity’s anthropocentrism, emerged from his own understanding of the biblical tradition. Whether or not a particular expression of Christianity is anthropocentric is more dependent on the culture of its adherents than on the Bible itself. In fact, both Benedict’s reading of the biblical creation and the dominant Western Christian understanding of that tradition, of which White is critical, exemplify a post-Cartesian reading of the Bible with the assumption that humankind is separate and distinct from the natural world (cf. Hoffman and Sandelands 2005: 149–155). Such anthropocentric readings of the Bible are imposed upon the text, reflecting cultural assumptions, rather than the result of understanding the text in its own sociohistorical context. Western Christianity may indeed be the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen, as White claims, but only because Western culture, the offspring of the Enlightenment, is so anthropocentric.

The Bible emerged out of the agrarian worldview of the ancient Near East,<sup>2</sup> and as such, the Bible’s contribution to environmental discussions today is complex and mixed at best (Horrell 2010). On the one hand, the biblical writers’ experience of the natural world was so very different from the largely urban, technologically oriented, globally connected modern population that the biblical values toward the nature world (Simkins 1994) do not easily translate into contemporary environmental ethics.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the biblical values toward nature can offer ethical

<sup>1</sup> Neither Rolston nor Berry denies that the Bible expresses anthropocentric concerns, but such concerns do not translate into the thoroughly anthropocentric worldview that environmental activists often denounce. Instead, they recognize that such anthropocentric concerns are set within a larger worldview, in which humans are but one of God’s many creatures and concerns. As Rolston (1996: 26) nicely summarizes this stance: “So biblical writers put humans in their place; there is a people-to-people ethic of concern for any viable human ecology, and this takes place in a sphere swarming with creatures that are also of concern. Depending on the focus, this ethic is anthropocentric, or biocentric, or theocentric, but it is environmental at every scale”.

<sup>2</sup> The focus of this paper is on the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, though the argument could be extended to also include the New Testament.

<sup>3</sup> In 2009, the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* hosted a forum discussing and critiquing an essay by James A. Nash, where he argues against using the Bible as a moral authority in environmental debates. For Nash, the Bible is simply too historically and culturally bound to its ancient context and concerns to function as an adequate moral authority today, though he does argue that the Bible should be included in the dialogue. Nash’s essay is followed by both appreciative and critical responses from Robb (2009), Northcott (2009), Childs (2009), Davis (2009), Faramelli (2009), Deane-Drummond (2009), Zaleha (2009), and McDaniel (2009).

guidance for the more than one billion Christians globally who consider the Bible to be sacred scripture and authoritative (see Gottlieb 2007). If White is correct that “What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship” (1967: 1206; though compare Jenkins 2009; Whitney 1993), then the Bible is too important in the lives of too many people to be sidelined from the discussion,<sup>4</sup> for the Bible with its ancient agrarian worldview challenges the anthropocentrism that dominates, especially, Western culture.

The meaning and breadth of anthropocentrism has been contested (Hargrove 1992; Midgley 1994; Spitler 1982; Grey 1998), but if anthropocentrism is taken to mean, as it usually is in environmental discussions, that “human beings, and human beings only, are of intrinsic value (that is, valuable in and of themselves) and that non-human nature is valuable only insofar as it is valuable for human purposes (that is, valuable instrumentally—extrinsically—for its ability to serve human ends)” (Keller 2010: 4), then the Bible and its worldview is simply not anthropocentric. Although the Bible gives a great deal of attention to humans—it is indeed a text for and about humans—they are everywhere in the Bible embedded in the larger context of the creation and especially in their relationship with God. If humans have intrinsic value in the biblical tradition, then so does the rest of the natural world because humans and the rest of the natural world are valuable as part of God’s creation—an ecocentric worldview, if you will. But the creation itself has value only in as much as it is the creation of God, who remains in relationship with it. God imputes the creation—humans, animals, the land—with value, and God the creator is the measure of all that is good and right in the world. The biblical worldview is first and foremost theocentric.<sup>5</sup>

### The case against anthropocentrism in the biblical tradition

The hallmark texts for expressing anthropocentrism in the biblical tradition, cited by both Benedict and Lynn White, and by others, are Genesis 1 and Psalm 8. In Genesis 1, for example, God creates the human couple on the sixth and final day of creation, creating them in the image of God, and blessing them with the command, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over

<sup>4</sup> Berry (1993: 156) interestingly reverses the argument made by White. Rather than the Bible being the ideological and religious justification for environmental abuse, he argues that neglect and abuse of the environment leads to a misuse of the Bible: “The misuse of the Bible thus logically accompanies the abuse of Nature: if you are going to destroy creatures without respect, you will want to reduce them to ‘materiality’; you will want to deny that there is a spirit or truth in them, just as you will want to believe that only holy or ensouled creatures are human or only Christian humans”.

<sup>5</sup> Although Bron Taylor often criticizes Christianity as being inherently anthropocentric, the religion expressed in the biblical tradition, when taking its premodern, prescientific context into account, would correspond to his definition of “dark green religion.” According to the biblical religion, all creation is sacred (though not divine; see Berry 1993, who emphasizes its holiness), and all creatures have intrinsic value, which is imputed by God. Using Taylor’s own criteria, the biblical value system is “(1) based on a felt kinship with the rest of life ...; (2) accompanied by feelings of humility and a corresponding critique of human moral superiority ...; and (3) reinforced by metaphysics of interconnection and the idea of interdependence ...” (2010: 13). Although not the focus of the essay, some of these characteristics of deep green religion will be addressed in the argument below.

the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (1:28; NRSV). On the surface, this text does indeed seem to place humans at the pinnacle of creation with all of nature given to them for their use. But on closer examination and in the context of the biblical tradition as a whole, being in the image of God has its limits. The human couple may come together in sexual intercourse, but only God opens the womb so that a woman may bear a child. The man may subdue the earth through tilling and sowing, but only God brings the rain that softens the soil and causes the seed to germinate. Humans are blessed with dominion over living creatures, but they are not free to eat them—at least not yet. When God does finally permit humans to eat living creatures, God places restrictions on how they should be killed (i.e., the creatures should be drained of blood; Genesis 9:3–4) and which animals can be eaten (i.e., no unclean creature should be eaten; Leviticus 11). Human dominion only extends to the animal world; it does not encompass the climate, water resources, or natural processes (cf. Kay 1989: 222). Moreover, as the rest of the biblical tradition makes clear, the exercise of human dominion over the animal world is unrealized; wild animals remain outside the scope of human rule.

Despite these limitations to being in the image of God, the scribes who composed Genesis 1 nevertheless affirmed the distinctive status of humans. Humans alone in God’s creation are singled out as being in the image of God, and humans alone are given dominion. Psalm 8 similarly highlights this distinctive status of humans:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
    the moon and the stars that you have established;  
What are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
    mortals that you take care for them?  
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
    and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
    you have put all things under their feet,  
all sheep and oxen,  
    and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
    whatever passes along the paths of the seas (8:3–8).

It is difficult to imagine a more anthropocentric claim! But the glory and honor of humans extolled in this psalm is at odds with so much of the biblical tradition and with human experience generally. When have humans on this planet ever lived up to such a lofty status? In the Genesis stories following the creation of humans, for example, human violence so corrupts the world that God destroys it with a flood and begins anew. In order to curb humankind’s violent tendencies, God’s blessing to Noah and his sons includes both concessions and limitations. Humans should again procreate and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1), but absent is any reference to subduing the earth and having dominion over all living creatures. Instead, a fear and dread of humans will characterize the animal world. Their fear and dread is justified, for humans are given permission to kill and eat other living creatures. Their flesh may be eaten but not their blood, for their blood belongs to God (Genesis 9:2–5). As a

concession to the human propensity toward violence, God gives humans animal flesh for food, but as a reminder that God is the creator of all life, God prohibits their blood.

The very context of Psalm 8 also challenges its claim of a lofty human status. Psalms 7–10 as a whole plead for God's justice and deliverance in the midst of human violence and oppression:

O let the evil of the wicked come to an end....

See how they conceive evil,

And are pregnant with mischief,

And bring forth lies.

They make a pit, digging it out,

And fall into the hole that they have made.

Their mischief returns upon their own heads,

And on their own heads their violence descends (7:9, 14–16).

Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail;

let the nations be judged before you.

Put them in fear, O LORD;

let the nations know that they are only human (9:19–20).

In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor –

let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.

For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart,

those greedy for gain curse and renounce the LORD.

In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, “God will not seek it out”;

all their thoughts are, “There is no God” (10:2–4).

So much for human glory and honor! The context of Psalm 8 exposes the false hope of anthropocentrism with the reality of human experience. Human dominion over creation has become a self-serving dominion of some humans over others. In its larger context, Psalm 8 is not a triumphal hymn, celebrating human ascendancy to near-God status. Rather, it is a hymn expressing the psalmist's amazement that, given the human condition, God has blessed humankind with such a distinctive status. The reality of the human condition, however, makes clear that our divinely given status is not yet realized. Mays (2006: 34) is undoubtedly correct when he argues that the psalm expresses what might be called “an eschatological tension”: Humans presently exist “between creation and realization, living an unfulfilled destiny in a flawed and perverted way”. Dominion is a hope, not a reality.

Finally, it is important to note that God's command to humankind to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue the earth, and to have dominion over all living creatures is placed in the context of blessing and therefore remains dependent on God's own activity (cf. Kay 1989: 220). As blessing, subduing and having dominion are not inherent characteristics of humankind, nor a divine right given to humans. They are rather the expression of God's creative activity through the work of humans (just as procreation may be viewed, and rightly so, as a divine miracle). Being in the image of God marks the distinctive status of humankind, but subduing and having dominion are only possible as God chooses to make it so. Elsewhere in the biblical tradition, such blessing is linked to Israel's obedience to God's covenant (see

Westermann 1978: 48). When Israel is faithful to the covenant, then God will ensure the prosperity of Israel through increasing the fruit of its womb, the fruit of its livestock, and the fruit of its arable land (Deuteronomy 28:11). However, when Israel is unfaithful to the covenant, its subduing and dominion will be ineffectual: its land will not yield food and its wombs and livestock will miscarry; the Israelites will die in the land due to disease, pestilence, and other afflictions, and the birds and animals will consume their corpses (Deuteronomy 28:15–68). God's blessing is made conditional upon Israel's actions, but even so, it is not Israel that produces the blessing. Blessing is wholly the activity of God, as the Deuteronomist reminds the Israelites:

Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hands have gotten me this wealth.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today (Deuteronomy 8:17–18).

Although Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 highlight the distinctive status of humankind in the creation, they do not do so from an anthropocentric worldview. The limits and failures of human dominion should dethrone any such notion. Instead, in the biblical tradition all creation, humankind included, is dependent upon God the creator. There is no conception of “nature” in the biblical world—either as the physical world distinct from humans, or as a causal and regulating physical force—only creation, which is “the earth and what fills it, the world and what lives in it” (Psalm 24:1), and this belongs to God and is sustained by God. The biblical tradition expresses a theocentric worldview. Humans are part and parcel of creation, and have a distinctive status and role within creation. But humans are neither the measure of creation nor the purpose of creation.

### The place of humans in a theocentric context

Although the biblical tradition as a whole stems from the theocentric worldview of the biblical scribes, three biblical texts in particular offer alternative understandings of the status and role of humans within the creation: Genesis 2:4–3:24, Psalm 104, and Job 38:1–42:6. Each of these texts challenges the prominent status ascribed to humans in Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 and highlights the relationship of humankind to the rest of the creation.

#### The Yahwist creation story in Genesis 2–3

The Yahwist Creation story in Genesis 2–3 is distinct from the Priestly creation story in Genesis 1 and is perhaps also the occasion for the Priestly scribes own formulation of humans being created in the image of God. For whereas the Priestly scribes boldly proclaim that humans are created to be distinctly different from all other living creatures, the Yahwist tradition admits to a much more ambiguous situation. Humans in the Yahwist story are also like God and distinct from other

creatures, but only because of their rebellion against God (for a fully developed interpretation of the Yahwist creation story, see Simkins 1994: 177–192).

In Genesis 2, the human creature is created out of the arable land to work the very land from which he was created. In all that happens subsequently in the story, this fundamental bond between humankind and the land is never altered: Humans belong to the earth and return to it in their death. Human purpose in this world is also defined by this bond. Humans are created to bring life to the land through agriculture. Genesis 2:5 suggests that the earth is dependent upon humans for their labor, but it is also careful to note that agriculture is a collaborative effort: Humans will till and work the soil, and God will supply the rain. The Priestly command to “subdue the earth” says no more than this, though its formulation suppresses humankind’s dependence on God’s contribution to the work.

In the Yahwist story, all animal life is created out of the arable land to help the man in his labor. And although no creature is a fitting partner for the man (literally, “corresponds to” the man), all creatures share the same substance and origin as that of the man. Humans and animals form a community of earth creatures (Hiebert 1996: 63), though the Yahwist never explores the benefits or ramifications of this community. Instead, attention is given to the disruption of this community through the human couple’s eating of the fruit of knowledge. By eating the fruit, which had been forbidden by God, the humans become “like God knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). This new status differentiates humans from the rest of the earth creatures. Their relationship will no longer be characterized by “help” (cf. Hiebert 1996: 60), but rather by “enmity.” Speaking to the serpent, God initiates this new relationship as a curse:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
he will strike your head,  
and you will strike his heel (Genesis 3:15).

The serpent, which played a pivotal role in the human couple’s rebellion, is representative of all domestic and wild animals (cf. the reference to every *behemah* and *hayyat hassadeh* in Genesis 3:14), and so just as the serpent is cursed, all animals are cursed. Humans and animals no longer belong to the same community; Humans will exploit and subject animals to their own will, and slaughter those animals that pose a threat to the human community. The Priestly tradition also affirms this distinction between humans and animals with its emphasis on human dominion before the flood and the divine concession to eat animals after the flood. What is absent in the Priestly tradition is any hint that animals may do harm to humans.

Human rebellion to be like God has disrupted the state of creation (which is the basic meaning of “curse”). Not only does their new knowledge alter their relationship with animals, it also sows differentiation and dependency within the human community. Although their knowledge makes human community possible (through procreation), men and women will engage in distinct social roles, filled with toil, with one gender dominating the other. Moreover, the collaboration

between God and humans is suspended: the arable land is cursed as God withholds the rain from the land. Human labor will yield only thorns and thistles, not the abundant agriculture for which humans were created (*Genesis* 3:16–19).

The Yahwist creation story wrestles with the ambiguities inherent in the place of humans in the world. Humans are mortal, fleshy creatures like all animals, yet humans are also like God with knowledge and creativity. Humans can produce new life like God and build magnificent creations, yet forces beyond their control may frustrate their labor. Humans may come together for community, yet they dominate, oppress, and even kill one another. The place of humans in this world is at once exalted and humble, and at the core of this ambiguity, for the Yahwist, is the act of human rebellion against God. The first humans simply decided to pursue their own desires rather than yield to God's prohibition. Eating the forbidden fruit did not corrupt humankind, nor did the human couple achieve a higher status with no effect from their disobedience. For the Yahwist, the status of humans in this world cannot be separated from the means by which they achieved their status. It is the nature of humans to be like God, yet also to rebel against God. Or as God in the Yahwist tradition points out after the flood, "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth" (*Genesis* 8:21).

The curses on the animals and on the arable land are the corollary of humankind's ambiguous status. The curse on the arable land appears to be God's first attempt at curbing the "evil inclination," but it is not successful. Human rebellion continues. Thus, God revokes the curse on the arable land following the flood, as God promises to uphold the seasonal cycle that is characteristic of the eastern Mediterranean (*Genesis* 8:20–22). God will address the "evil inclination" by other means.

The curse on the animals, however, is not alleviated, nor does the Yahwist tradition address it further, for the curse on the animals reflected the common Near Eastern understanding of the violent relationship between humans and especially wild animals. The Near Eastern conception of creation is limited, dynamic, and corresponds to the activity of the gods. In the Yahwist's story, for example, creation is discernible in God's forming living creatures from the dirt, the building of the woman, the human–divine collaboration in agriculture, and in God's planting and the humans tending of the garden. The dry, barren desert that existed prior to God's activity and that continues to characterize much of the landscape around Israel and in the Near East remains outside the bounds of creation (and thus, Israel must be sustained by God when in the desert; cf. Feldt 2012). Although God created the animals and thus they are an expression of God's creative activity, the curse on the animals separates them from the creation. Domestic animals become part of the human community and so are incorporated into creation, but wild animals remain with the desert outside of creation and a threat to the human community. As such, the covenant and prophetic traditions treat wild animals as agents of God's judgment, and the violence and enmity that is characteristic of wild animals is comparable with that of enemy armies and hostile invaders (see Deuteronomy 28:26; Jeremiah 15:3; Ezekiel 5:17; Isaiah 18:6; 34:11, 13–15; Hosea 2:12). The roaming of wild animals in inhabited towns and sown fields signals the ruination of creation.

The threat of wild animals and the undoing of creation were real to the Israelites. Thus, God's blessing in the covenant formulation promises security from the wild animals in addition to seasonal rain and agricultural bounty:

I will grant peace in your land, and 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 your land (Leviticus 26:6; cf. Ezekiel 34:25).

Similarly, in a message of hope after proclaiming God's judgment on Israel and its land, which includes wild animals devouring the land's vines and fig trees, Hosea proclaims a renewed relationship with God that will include peace with the animals:

I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety (Hosea 2:18).

Although this text might suggest a reversal of the curse on the animals, the context may suggest no more than that the ravaging of the wild animals will come to an end. In other words, the wild animals will once again retreat beyond the bounds of creation that will be restored in Israel (see Tucker 2000). There is peace between humans and animals through covenant, not through a transformation of the creation. The prophet Isaiah, on the other hand, appears to envision a coming day when the hostility between humans and animals will be reconciled, when the curse on the animals will be annulled. As the result of a coming king who will reign in justice and righteousness, Isaiah proclaims, even the human and animal worlds will live in peace:

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 cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
They will not hurt or destroy  
on my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:6–9).

There will be peace between the domestic animals, representative of the human community, and wild animals, and in a waive to the Yahwist tradition, the offspring of the woman and the serpent will play together with no harm.

#### Psalm 104

In contrast to the Yahwist creation story, and most of the biblical tradition (not to mention Near Eastern traditions generally), Psalm 104 and the speech of God in Job

38–42 do not present wild animals as hostile forces or inimical to creation. Indeed, these two texts, which share many similarities on this matter, give little attention to the role of humans in the world and instead focus on God's attention to and relationship with the wild creatures of this world.

Psalm 104 is not a creation account, detailing God's creation of the world, but rather a panoramic hymn praising God for continually sustaining the creation. Nevertheless, the hymn has explicit similarities with the Priestly Creation story in Genesis 1. Both traditions present the creation in a similar order, beginning first with light, then water and sky, land and vegetation, sun and moon. The reference to animals, humans, and sea creatures in the psalm deviates from the order that is found in Genesis 1, but like Genesis 1, focus is given to each in the psalm. The psalm and Genesis 1 also share much common vocabulary, which stands out in contrast to the vocabulary of other creation texts. Finally, only Genesis 1, with its general reference to the sea monsters (Hebrew *tanninim*), and Psalm 104, with its specific reference to Leviathan, present the beast as one of God's creatures. Elsewhere, Leviathan, or the *tanninim*, represents a primordial sea dragon that God must defeat in battle to secure the order of creation (see, for example, Psalm 74:13–14). In his speech to Job, God's defeat of the ferocious Leviathan is the object of his great boast before Job, but in Psalm 104, Leviathan is simply a creature that God formed to sport in the sea (Psalm 104:26). The similarities between Psalm 104 and Genesis 1 have resulted in debate among scholars over which text is dependent on the other, with many scholars aligning themselves on either side of the issue (compare Levinson 1988: 54–65 and Berlin 2005 for two different interpretations of the relationship between these texts). The similarities between the two texts are real, but they do not demand literary dependence. Psalm 104 and Genesis 1 may simply be “relatively independent expressions of the same part of Israelite theology” (Craigie 1974: 18). In any case, it would be imprudent to base the interpretation of Psalm 104 on a conjectured literary relationship with Genesis 1.

Although the similarities between Psalm 104 and Genesis 1 are noteworthy, the differences between the texts are more significant for understanding the psalm. What looms large in Genesis 1 with its articulation of the status and role of humans is virtually absent in Psalm 104. The panoramic praise of the psalm is sung from a human perspective, and the animals described in each part of the psalm are referenced in relation to humans, but humans are not singled out as special or distinctive in the creation (except in terms of their wickedness). Humankind is not in the image of God, nor do humans have dominion over all other living creatures. Instead, all creatures, including humans, are dependent upon God for their food and subsistence.

Significantly, all the creatures referenced in the psalm, with the possible exception of the “cattle” (*behemah*) in verse 14,<sup>6</sup> are wild animals. All of these

<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew term *behemah* may refer to wild or domestic land animals, or to all land animals generally, but when it occurs in contrast to *hayyah* (v. 11), it usually refers to domestic land animals. The contrast that is made in v. 14, however, is not between wild and domestic animals, but between animals that eat grass (*sir*) and humans that eat plants (*'eseb*). In this case, *behemah* may refer to all herbivore land animals, whether they are wild or domestic.

creatures, including the “cattle” and especially Leviathan, live and carry out their tasks independently of humankind and human dominion. No creature serves humankind, not even the “cattle” (see Harrelson 1975: 20). Moreover, all of the animals are engaged in activities that resemble human tasks: drinking, eating, resting, sitting, having homes, going to work, returning home, and playing. The psalmist thinks of the animals and even Leviathan “as fellow creatures with whom he or she shared a common life” (Whitekettle 2011: 183).

None of the creatures in Psalm 104, and most notably Leviathan, is outside of the bounds of creation. God’s creative sustaining of the world encompasses all creatures. This is a similarity that Psalm 104 shares with Genesis 1, where God creates all creatures including the sea monsters. The harmonious creation of Genesis 1, however, is disrupted by the curse on the animals in Genesis 3. Indeed, the Priestly scribes endorse the Yahwist’s depiction of this curse by accentuating the fear and dread that is on all animals following the flood (Genesis 9:2). This is not the case in Psalm 104. There is no space or creature outside the sustaining creative activity of God.

The role of God in Psalm 104 corresponds to what we would call today the forces of nature. Whereas the scientific worldview would explain change in the world in term of natural causality—whether they are physical, chemical, or biological causes—the biblical psalmist understood the world in terms of personal causality. All change in the world beyond individual agency—whether human or animal—belongs to God, and thus, all life is dependent on God. Whether it be the movement of the sun to light and heat the day and to signal the work day and seasonal chores, or the control of water that gushes forth from springs, fills river beds and the seas, or rains upon the land, it is God’s activity alone that makes life possible. The distinction between humans and animals that is highlighted elsewhere in the biblical tradition is insignificant in the context of God’s activity, for humans are as dependent upon God as all other creatures.<sup>7</sup> The mutual dependence of all creatures on God is stated no more clearly than in the psalm’s depiction of the natural cycle of life and death:

These all look to you  
to give them their food in due season;  
when you give to them, they gather it up;  
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.  
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath, they die  
and return to the dust.  
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;  
and you renew the face of the ground (Psalm 104:27–30).

Only in the last verse of the psalm are humans singled out as distinctive from other creatures: “Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more”

<sup>7</sup> William Brown (2010: 141–159) argues that Psalm 104 offers a correction to the anthropic principle: Humans may have their place, but the creation was not designed around them. “If there is a ‘principle’ at work in creation according to the psalm, it is inclusively ‘biotic’ rather than anthropic” (2010: 153).

(Psalm 104:35). In contrast to the wild animals, whose presence elsewhere represents the undoing of creation, and in contrast to Leviathan, which elsewhere is the primordial threat to God's creation, this psalm lays the ruin of creation at human feet. Only humans, out of all creatures, pose a threat to God's creation because only humans stand in opposition to God. Thus, in awe of the beauty and wonder of God's creation, the psalmist prays that no humans would corrupt it. The world and all that is in it belongs to God (cf. Psalm 24:1).<sup>8</sup>

### The speech of God in Job 38–42

Whereas Psalm 104 marginalizes the role of humans in the natural world, the speeches of God in the book of Job declare humans to be irrelevant. In response to Job's accusations that God has not properly governed the world, God addresses Job with a litany of rhetorical questions on the creation (Job 38:4–39:30) and then with a description of two beasts—Behemoth and Leviathan (Job 40:15–41:34)—whose very existence mocks Job's own sense of self-importance. Job, who thought that God should give attention to his innocent suffering, that God should give an account of his negligence in administering the creation, is silenced in the encounter between the splendors of creation and his own human limits (cf. Crenshaw 1992). The divine speeches in Job are radically non-anthropocentric: the world is simply not about humans.

In the first speech (Job 38:4–39:30), God mocks Job by questioning his role in or understanding of the vast creation, addressing issues of cosmology, meteorology, and zoology. The first speech shares many similarities with Psalm 104, emphasizing not only God's role in establishing and sustaining the creation, but also God's attention to the wild animals. Unlike Psalm 104, however, the description of God's creation in the first speech serves to emphasize the limits of human knowledge and dominion in the world. The creation is vastly greater than Job's experience, his understanding, and his control, and the many wild animals described by God are not only of no use to Job, but they have a relationship with God independent of humankind.

Although humans play virtually no role in God's creation depicted in the book of Job, three references to humans in the first divine speech may serve as hermeneutical clues for interpreting the speech. The first passage (38:13–15) notes how the morning and dawn expose the wicked, shaking them out of the earth. Clearly not a favorable reference to humans, but it addresses Job's concerns for justice expressed earlier in the book. God and God's creation are not indifferent to evil. The second and third passages more directly address the focus of this paper. God interrogates Job regarding his ability to sustain the creation with rain:

<sup>8</sup> Limburg (1994: 344) claims that the “orientation of this psalm is not anthropocentric but rather geocentric, earth-centered”. Indeed, the psalm emphasizes that God's activity encompasses the earth rather than simply focuses on humans. It is a misnomer, however, to characterize the psalm as “geocentric,” for it is *God's* activity that is focus of the psalm and it is dependence on *God* that all creation shares. The psalmist's worldview is theocentric rather than geocentric, and it is certainly not anthropocentric.

Who has 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,  
to satisfy the waste and desolate land,  
and to make the ground put forth grass? (Job 38:25–27).

In this text, God sustains the creation, not for the sake of humans, but for the sake of the land, which does not include humans at all. The waste and desolate land is valuable to God and needs sustaining, not because it is of use to humans, but because it is part of God's creation (Tucker 1997: 14; Dick 2006: 266). The third hermeneutical clue is found in the description of the final creature mentioned in the first speech. Often translated "eagle," the *nesher* is a bird of prey that might be better understood to be the vulture in this context. After describing its home high in the rocky crag, the divine speech concludes:

From there it spies the prey;  
its eyes see it from far away.  
Its young ones suck up blood;  
and where the slain are, there it is (Job 39:29–30).

Dead humans on a battlefield are no more than carrion for the birds of prey; so much for the glory of humans!

In the second divine speech (Job 40:15–41:34), God introduces Job to Behemoth and Leviathan, two mythological beasts that challenge Job's status and his dominion in creation. Behemoth, which is perhaps imagined like a hippopotamus, is described as a beast that God made just as he made Job (40:15). What is comparable between the creations of Job and Behemoth is not stated, but the affinity between them suggests that Job is no more important to God than is Behemoth. Indeed, Behemoth's creation was "the first of the great acts of God" (40:19). A similar statement is used of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22, and it may imply not only first in a sequence, but also first in importance. Behemoth, created like Job, is nevertheless greater than Job. Leviathan too is beyond Job's equal. The ferocious Leviathan, who makes even the gods afraid (Job 41:25), can only be controlled by God. Human dominion is a charade before the likes of Leviathan:

On earth it has no equal,  
a creature without fear.  
It surveys everything that is lofty;  
it is king over all that are proud (Job 41:33–34).

The speeches of God in the book of Job do not address the role of humans in relation to domestic animals, or the task of humans in agriculture and other creative endeavors. In other words, the divine speeches do not intend to affirm the place of humans in world, but rather to challenge those, who like Job, think the world revolves around them (see Dick 2006: 263–270). The speeches of God in Job are a critique of the anthropocentric view of the world (see Schifferdecker 2008: 63–102; Brown 2010: 115–140).

## Conclusion

The Bible's role in environmental discussions has been embraced, dismissed, and debated. Because the Bible was produced in a premodern, prescientific world in which the people experienced many different concerns in relation to their environment than we do today, it is not surprising that the Bible's contribution to current environmental discussions would be limited. Many of the concerns of the biblical writers were simply not the concerns of contemporary environmentally minded people, nor should we expect the Bible to address our concerns of climate change, sustainability, or the dangers of genetic modifications—these were not challenges the ancients faced. Nevertheless, contrary to the readings of the Western Christian tradition, singled out by Lynn White, the Bible may be used to challenge the pervasive anthropocentrism of so much of Western Christianity.

The Bible has been read anthropocentrically—a Western cultural imposition on the Bible—but anthropocentrism is not the biblical worldview. Humans in the biblical tradition are distinct from other living creatures and are assigned by God distinctive tasks within the creation. But that which makes humans distinctive in the biblical tradition cannot be separated from human rebellion against God. The Bible also emphasizes that humans are inclined toward evil. Being in the image of God, subduing the earth, and having dominion over the animals are not without risk and danger to the creation to which humans belong. Humans may make their own way in the world, but the world is not theirs to make, and they are ultimately answerable to God, the creator.

The biblical worldview is theocentric. The world belongs not to humans but to God, who created and sustains it. In comparison with God's work in creation, the distinctive status and tasks of humans are insignificant. In a theocentric worldview, humans have more in common with the other living creatures than they have differences. All alike are dependent upon God for creation and subsistence, and all alike are valuable to God as part of his creation (Psalm 24:1–2). The world, inclusive of humans and animals, trees and plants, belongs to God because it is God's creation, and it is in relation to God that each part of creation has its value and worth. The biblical worldview offers a challenge to the anthropocentrism that has infected Western Christianity since the Enlightenment by dethroning humans from their artificial (human-made) precipice overlooking the natural world. Humans are part and parcel of the creation, along with the rest of the natural world, and their role within the creation cannot separate them from the creation.

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