

Nature and Theodicy in the Book of Job
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The book of Job has more to say about nature than any other biblical wisdom book. Concepts of nature are woven into the dialogs throughout the book -- in the mouth of Job, Job's friends, God himself, and in the prologue. Much of the theology of nature is in the form of implicit assumptions that inform the book's teachings on many subjects.

References to nature serve the theodicy of Job, which is the major theme of the book. A theodicy seeks to explain how God's goodness and power can coexist with a world of suffering and evil.¹ In the book of Job, figures of speech using nature and explanations of God's involvement in nature help reconcile God's goodness and sovereignty with human suffering. References to nature function rhetorically to explain both the false view of suffering offered by Job's friends and the correct view of suffering described in the prologue and in God's message to Job from the whirlwind.

The teachings and assumptions about nature in this book are an important part of a biblical theology of nature. In addition, reflection on Job's theology of nature has some important implications for forming a biblically rooted system of ecological ethics.

The Theology of Nature in the Book of Job

Nature Is Part of God's Good Creation

As in the rest of Scripture, the book of Job affirms that God created all things in nature. In God's response to Job's complaint (ch. 38-41), God says that he laid the foundation of the earth, determined the dimensions of the earth and the boundaries of the sea, and made the animals, stars, weather, and other aspects of nature (38:4-11, 31-33; cf. 26:12-14 [Job]²). God created all animals, including the "behemoth" (בְּהֵמוֹת, 40:15), which is a powerful, uncontrollable land animal (possibly the hippopotamus).³ By using this extreme example, which he describes as having great strength (40:16-18), God emphasizes his great power with which he created and controls all animals (cf. 10:8-9; 14:15; 31:15; 33:4; 37:7). In Job's defense against his accusers,

¹ The term "theodicy" comes from Greek words θεος ("god") and the root δικ- ("righteousness"). It was coined by the philosopher Leibniz in his *Théodicée* (1710). Theodicy "seeks to 'justify the ways of God to man' (Milton), showing that God is in the right and is glorious and worthy of praise despite contrary appearances." J.I. Packer, "Theodicy," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. J.I. Packer and Sinclair B. Ferguson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 678.

² Job 26:12-14 says "God quieted the sea with his power, and by his understanding he shattered Rahab". This poetic depiction of God's work in creation does not necessarily mean that the author or even Job believe in the existence of the mythological sea God Rahab. The function is to say that "no creature, real or imaginary, is beyond God's control" (Robert Alden, , vol. 11, *Job*, New American Commentary (Broadman and Holman: Nashville, 1993), 260). "As a monotheist Job did not deify the sea or believe in the existence of a sea god, any more than a modern preacher who cites a nursery rhyme believes in the existence of those fictional characters" (p. 74; cf. E. Smick, "Mythology and the Book of Job," *JETS* 13 (1970): 105).

³ Since Samuel Bochart, *Hierozoicon. Sive bipartitum opus de animalibus sacrae scripturae* (London: , 1663), most scholars have believed that בְּהֵמוֹת refers to the hippopotamus (HALOT, בְּהֵמוֹת; cf. Alden, 395). For a discussion of a possible mythological background for this beast, see Marvin H. Pope, , *Job*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 268-71. Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978), 569-72, extensively discusses the history of the identification of "behemoth" and "leviathan" and shows that they are real animals, not mythological ones.

he says that God created the constellations of stars (9:8-9; cf. God's later statements: 38:31-33). When Job affirms that God made him from the "dust" in 10:8-9, this echoes the Genesis creation account in Gen 2:7, which uses the same word (עָפָר) for "dust" where it says "the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground."⁴ Later Job says, "God spreads out the northern skies over empty space; he suspends the earth over nothing" (26:7 NIV). "Empty space" translates תִּהְיוּ, which is the same word that Gen 1:2 uses to say that the earth was without form after the initial creation of matter. This suggests that Job 26:7 means that God created the celestial bodies out of nothing.⁵ This verse further says that God suspended the earth in space. Although this idea was not common at the time, the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras argued in the 6th century B.C. that the earth traveled in space like the planets.⁶

Nature is inherently good as a part of God's creation. The book of Job has a strong sense of God's pleasure and delight in nature. For example, in God's reply to Job from the whirlwind (ch. 38-42), God describes with pleasure the lives of various animals and his involvement in providing for their needs (39:5-30). God tells Job that the "beasts of the field play" (40:20) and "the ostriches' wings flap joyously" (39:13; cf. Ps 104:26 ["Leviathan frolicking" in the sea]). These anthropomorphic descriptions of the delight of animals in life reflect the goodness of God's creation. Similarly, after God created each part of nature in Genesis 1, the author says that God "saw that it was good" (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

When people look at nature they should see the mighty hand of God behind it. Job poetically describes how reflection on nature should teach us of God's work as sovereign creator and sustainer of all life:

⁷ But now ask the beasts, and let them teach you;
And the birds of the heavens, and let them tell you.
⁸ "Or speak to the earth, and let it teach you;
And let the fish of the sea declare to you.
⁹ "Who among all these does not know
That the hand of the Lord has done this,
¹⁰ In whose hand is the life of every living thing,
And the breath of all mankind? (12:7-10)

Nature has an order that God ordained. A significant part of God's reply to Job (ch. 38-42) describes the order he established in various aspects of creation. God "caused the dawn to know its place" (38:12) and he establish the constellations of the stars and their seasonal movements

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 revision.

⁵ Although עָפָר can mean the north (cf. NASB, RSV, KJV), originally it meant the assembly place of the Canaanite gods, where Baal reigned as the supreme god (TWOT, "עָפָר", p. 774). As a monotheist, Job strips the term of its mythological roots to refer to the celestial dwelling place of God (Smick, 103). When it is used figuratively of God creating something, נִפְתָּח normally is used with the heavens as an object to mean God "stretched out" the heavens as one would a tent (Job 9:8; Isa 40:22; 42:5; 44:24; 45:12; Ps 104:2; TWOT, "נִפְתָּח", 574). Hence עָפָר may refer to the "northern sky" (NIV; Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*. (1886-1891; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 4:520).

⁶ Pythagoras gained knowledge this knowledge from his studies in Egypt and the East (Moses Bottenweiser, *The Book of Job* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), quoted by Smick, 103). Pope, 165, flatly rejects the possibility that the author of Job could believe the earth was suspended in space, but offers no exegetical evidence. Job 38:4 does not contradict this idea. God simply asks Job rhetorically if he was there when God constructed the earth, implying Job does not have comprehensive knowledge of how the universe is set up. The verse makes no ontological claims about the nature of the universe.

(38:31-34). God “enclosed the sea with doors . . . and placed boundaries on it” (38:8, 10). “As Creator he has the authority to delimit the sea and confine it to its place.”⁷ Nature has order because God, the creator, continues to be involved in the operation of creation. However, the full extent of the beauty and order of creation can never be fully understood by human beings, since they were not there at creation and they do not have the big picture of the created order that God has (38:4-7).

Nature has value apart from its utility to humanity.⁸ Our human tendency is to view nature anthropocentrically in terms of how it benefits human society. But God shows a delight in nature in itself. God waters areas of the earth where people do not live (38:25-26). God speaks with delight about the worth of wild animals, such as the mountain goat, wild donkey, wild ox, ostrich, hawk, eagle (39:1-30), behemoth (40:15-24, probably the hippopotamus or perhaps the elephant), and leviathan (41:1-34, a fierce sea creature, possibly the crocodile).⁹ Even animals that humans have domesticated, such as the horse, have a wild majesty that God gave them, apart from their utility to people (39:19-25). God wants Job to realize that nature has value even when it has no relevance to human beings. The behemoth and leviathan were created for God's delight and to enjoy life in themselves, even though human beings have no control over them. Since God is the creator of all things, everything in nature belongs to God. God tells Job, “Whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine” (41:11; cf. Ps 24:1, “the earth is the Lord’s and all it contains”). Thus the view of nature in the book of Job is theocentric, not anthropocentric – nature exists because of God’s will and for God’s glory.¹⁰

What is the human place in relationship to nature? Humanity is part of nature, yet humanity is also exalted above nature. On one level, humans share with animals a material nature (4:19; 10:8-9; 40:15), because they are created by God from the dust of the earth. The physical life of people is temporary and fleeting (4:21; 9:25). Yet on another level, human beings are the

⁷ Alden, 372.

⁸ Cf. William A. Dyrness, “Stewardship of the Earth in the Old Testament,” in *Tending the Garden*, ed. Wesley Granger-Michaelson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 52-53.

⁹ Leviathan is a fierce sea creature (cf. Is. 27:1). Most scholars believe it to be the crocodile (e.g. David J. A. Clines, , vol. 17, *Job 1-20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2002), xlvi; Alden, 400; H. H. Rowley, , *The Book of Job*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 258). A few believe it is the whale (G. R. Driver, “Mythical Monsters in the Old Testament,” in *Studi Orientalistici in Onore Di Giorgio Levi Della Vida* (Rome: Istituto per L’Orienta, 1956), 238-39; Howard Wallace, “Leviathan and the Beast in Revelation,” *BA* 11, no. 3 (September 1948): 61-62). Pope, 276-78, argues for a mythological meaning. However, the context is about animals in nature, not mythological creatures and the description here does not fit a supernatural creature. Just as Egypt is called by the mythological name “Rahab” in Isa 30:7, so a mythological name is applied to a sea creature here (Rowley, 258), perhaps to stress Job’s inability to subdue it.

¹⁰ Cf. Richard A. Young, *Healing the Earth. A Theocentric Perspective on Environmental Problems and Their Solutions* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 95. Young argues that the dominant biblical view of nature is that it has “intrinsic value” because “(1) God created it, (2) God owns it, (3) God designed it for a purpose, and (4) God recognized it as good” (p. 84). This “theocentric” view of nature runs throughout Scripture (pp. 75-98). H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature. The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 189-218, also argues against an anthropocentric reading of nature whereby nature is merely the stage for God’s dealings with humanity in history (e.g. Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 20; G. W. H. Lampe, “The New Testament Doctrine of Ktisis,” *SJT* 17 (1964): 430, 452, 456). However, in contrast to the theocentric reading of nature that Young says is the biblical view, Santmire argues for an ecological reading of biblical theology and an “ecological hermeneutic of history.” The Bible should be read not in terms of God and humanity against nature, but in terms of God and humanity with nature. This biblical “ecological motif” uses the metaphors of migration to a good land and of fecundity. He finds these motifs through Scripture, except in John and Hebrews, which emphasize a metaphor of ascent, or a “spiritual motif,” and hence downplay nature.

pinnacle of God's creation and have a spiritual nature with moral accountability. As Job demonstrates, humans have the ability to know God and to communicate with him (e.g. 40:1; 42:1). Unlike animals, people have the capacity for moral choice and God holds them accountable for those choices (e.g. 1:8; 31:1-3, 13-14). God gives special attention to humanity (7:17-18; cf. Ps 8:4-5[5-6]; Ps 144.3).¹¹ Although God is not obligated to explain everything to Job, the fact that he speaks to Job about his concerns affirms humanity's importance to God. The prolog shows that God is proud of Job as a righteous man who honors him (1:8; 2:3). This tension between the physical nature of human beings and their spiritual nature runs throughout Scripture, starting with the creation story in Genesis. Humans were created from "the dust of the earth" (Gen 2:7a), yet they were also created in God's image and they were given dominion over animals (Gen 1:26-30; cf. 2:7b ["breath of life"]).

God is Actively Involved in Nature

Although God is the almighty creator and is transcendent above his creation, he is also immanent in nature and actively involved in its operation. This is essential to understanding the message about suffering in the book of Job.

God sustains nature and is directly involved in its operation. The importance of this theme to the message of the book is shown by the fact that this thread runs through the speeches of every character. Job says that God is the source of life for every creature (12:10; 33:4). God controls the movements of heavenly bodies such as the sun and stars and determines when eclipses will occur (9:7).¹² God knows everything that happens in nature and exerts control over the most powerful natural forces. He causes earthquakes (9:5-6) and controls the weather, including the wind, the rain (28:24-28), and the stormy seas (26:12-13). His power over nature is so great that he clears a storm with his mere breath (26:13), which is but a "faint . . . whisper" of his power (26: 14 NIV). Eliphaz agrees that God sends rain to water the earth (5:10) and Elihu also describes God's extensive control over the weather: He brings rain and snow, controls the temperature, causes lightning, and moves the winds (37:3-12). Elihu also says that without God's continued work there would be no life:

If He should determine to do so,
If He should gather to Himself His spirit and His breath,
All flesh would perish together,
And man would return to dust. (34:14-15)

God's sustaining influence is essential to the stable and ordered operation of nature.

The picture of God's involvement in the very details of the operation of nature is clearest in God's speech to Job. God orders the dawn, clouds, rain, snow, ice, and other aspects of the weather (38:12-38). God controls the sea (38:8-11, 16). He established "ordinances" (תִּקְוָה, 38:33) that control the movements of the stars and their positions in the constellations (38:31-33). He determines when the sun rises (38:12). God provides food for animals (38:39-41) and enables them to give birth, acting as a heavenly midwife (39:1-4). Animals obey him and do as he commands (ch. 39). He determines the characteristics of animals, such as the strength of the

¹¹ Clines, *Job 1-20*, 192, believes this is a "bitter parody" of Ps 8:4-5[5-6]. However, even if it is, it still reflects the same underlying theology, which Job begins to struggle with emotionally due to the pain he is undergoing.

¹² *Ibid.*, 230, says that the reference to making the sun no shine refers to "obscuring of the light of sun or stars by eclipses, clouds (cf. 3:5), sandstorms, or preternatural darkness (cf. Exod 10:21-23)."

horse and its great bravery in battle (39:19-25). These passages show that God has concern for the entire material creation, not just humanity.

These passages also emphasize God's sovereignty and power over all of nature, which serves the theodicy of the book. Nature is under God's control, despite the presence of evil in the world. Alden explains the function of these references: "The sea is not the hostile monster whom the supreme god must subdue but part of Yahweh's created dominion, submissive to his will."¹³ Even Satan must ask permission from God to harass Job with disease and "natural disasters" like a wind storm (ch. 1-2). This shows that God is ultimately in control and restrains the extent of evil, although he does not cause it. Even though it appears from Job's limited human perspective that Job's suffering somehow escaped God's grasp, the book assures us that God is still in control of all that happens in his creation.

The book of Job has a nuanced description of how God manages the operation of nature. God is in control of nature. Often he is directly involved in the events in nature (e.g. 37:2-7; 38:23, 31-33, 35; 26:7-9), such as when he "sends forth lightning" (38:35) or orders the snow to "fall to the earth" (37:6). However, apparently God does not always directly cause every natural event. God established "ordinances" (תקנות) that control the positions and movements of heavenly bodies (38:33; cf. Gen 1:14) and he set "boundaries" (קָוָה) for the weather (26:10; 28:26; cf. Jer 5:24), the waters (26:10; 38:10; cf. Prov 8:29) and the heavenly bodies (Job 38:33; cf. Jer 31:35-36; 33:25).¹⁴ This suggests that God established the universe to operate at least partially according to certain "natural laws." Further, Satan can also influence some aspects of nature (1:16-19; 2:7). Yet Satan's effect on nature requires God's permission and is subject to the restrictions that God sets in each specific situation (1:12; 2:6). Thus, since God establishes the laws determining the operation of nature and restricts Satan's use of nature for evil, God is ultimately in control of the universe, even when he does not directly cause an event in nature.

Nature is Influenced and Manipulated by Evil

Although God sovereignly controls nature, there is evil in God's creation due to the Fall of humanity and the influence of Satan. Yet the book of Job does not see nature itself as fallen or evil.

There are several allusions to the Fall of Adam and Eve in the book of Job. Job asks, "Have I covered my transgressions like Adam?" (31:33) Bildad observes that no one born of a woman can be completely righteous before God (25:4; cf. Ps 51:5[7]). Eliphaz asks, "Were you the first man to be born? . . . Do you . . . limit wisdom to yourself?" (15:7-8) This may be an allusion to Adam's desire to usurp knowledge.¹⁵ In 5:5-7, Eliphaz may allude to the curse on the ground, which resulted in thorns and created hardship when growing crops (Gen 3:17-19). He says that a fool's harvest is taken "from among thorns" (5:5 NIV). "Man is born for trouble" (5:7), which

¹³ Alden, 371.

¹⁴ "Ordinance" (תקנות) refers to a statute established by God. It is only used in Job in 38:33. There it is in poetic parallelism with "ordinance" (תקנות), which refers to "the order or ordinances of heaven imposed on earth." (Norman C. Habel, , *The Book of Job. A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 523.) The word קָוָה ("boundary, limit, law, order") is cognate to תקנות. In this type of context it describes "the order God has imposed upon his creation" (NIDOTTE, "קָוָה"). It appears frequently in Job in this sense (Job 26:10; 28:26; 38:10, 33; cf. Jer 5:24; 31:35-36; 33:25; Prov 8:29).

¹⁵ H. A. G Blocher, "Adam and Eve," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 373, translates Job 15:8b "did you grab for yourself wisdom?" He says this is "a reference to a usurping of knowledge which recalls the sin of Adam in Genesis."

probably refers to the hardship of life that is part of the curse of Gen. 3:16-19.¹⁶ The fact that vv. 17-26 imply that the righteous person will reverse the curse reinforces the interpretation that vv. 5-7 allude to the curse from the Fall. Although the book of Job does not develop the implications of the curse on nature due to human sin (unlike e.g. Gen. 3:17-19; Isa 31:13-14; 24:4-5; Rom 8:19-22), there are hints that the concept is assumed.

The influence of Satan on nature is more clearly presented. The prologue to Job emphasizes that Satan is active in this world.¹⁷ When God asks Satan where he has just come from, he replies, “From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.” (1:7; 2:2). This suggests that God has permitted Satan a certain freedom of activity on earth. The Apostle Paul similarly calls Satan “the god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4; cf. Eph 2:2) and Rev 12:9 says that Satan was expelled from heaven to the earth. Jesus called Satan’s operation in this world a kingdom (Luke 4:6; 11:18).

Satan used what we typically call “natural disasters” to tempt Job to deny God. He caused a lightning storm that killed Job’s servants and sheep (1:16). He caused a violent wind storm that destroyed Job’s house and killed his children (1:18-19). He afflicted Job with a horrible disease (2:7). God limits Satan from killing Job, but the implication is that he could have done this if God had given him permission (2:6). This story suggests that some negative aspects of nature can have their origin in evil spiritual powers or at least can be manipulated by them. Satan corrupts nature and makes it not entirely work as God intended. He can use nature in ways that are harmful to human beings. The Gospels reflect a similar perspective when they claim that some of the diseases that Jesus healed were caused by demons (Matt 12:22; Luke 13:16).

Although Satan can use nature for his evil purposes, the extent of Satan’s manipulation of nature is always limited by God’s sovereign permission. In each case when Satan wanted to afflict Job, he had to ask God’s permission (1:12; 2:6). God is still ultimately in control, since Satan can only act within the boundaries God gives him. The NT also affirms that Satan’s activities are limited by God. In Luke 22:31, Jesus says Satan asked permission to sift Peter like wheat. In Matt 5:12-13, the demons that Jesus had cast out of a man asked for Jesus’ permission to enter swine. The Apostle Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was a medical condition that was God’s

¹⁶ Job 5:5-7 is notoriously difficult to translate and interpret. Many interpretations depend on revocalizing the text, particularly in v. 5 (see the wide range of explanations summarized by Rowley, 52). The word used for “thorns” (צָר) is rare (only 5:5 and Prov 22:5). Many believe the verse means that thieves will steal the crops of the fool despite the attempt to protect the crops with tangle briars (e.g. Alden, 91). But since v. 7 says people are “born to trouble”, this reinforces the association of the thorns with the curse from the Fall (cf. Ps 51:5[7]). Alden, 91 believes v. 6 says that the problems that people face are not the ground’s fault. The ground was cursed due to the sin of the original humans. Habel, *Job*, 132, argues that the allusion to Gen 3:17-19 is reinforced by the cluster of words in v. 6 also found in Gen 3:17-19, such as אָדָם (“human being, man”), עָפָר (“dust”) and צֶמֶח (“sprout”). Francis Anderson, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 119, argues that since vv. 9-16 ascribe hardships to God, “the Lord is the hidden cause of the fool’s troubles,” since the divine decree is behind the curse rather than simply a harsh environment.

¹⁷ The word “Satan” includes the article (שָׂטָן) in Job 1-2 (cf. Zech 3:2). This suggests that the word is used here to mean “the adversary”, rather than as a proper name (“Satan”) as in later books of the Bible (e.g. 1 Chr 21:1). This probably reflects the early date of the book of Job and emphasizes his role of accusing God’s choice servant, Job (cf. Rev. 12:10). God has a council of heavenly beings that serve as messengers and do his will (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Jer 23:18, 22; Ps 89:5–7[6–8]). However, Habel goes too far when he says Satan was just a “roving reporter, a kind of celestial patrol officer who travels to and fro on Earth in much the same way as Persian spies” ([Habel, “Earth First”, p. 67). If his goal is to get Job to sin by cursing God (1:11; 2:5; cf. 1:21-22), it is hard to see how he is “just a prosecutor intent on establishing justice” with “no necessary evil intent or malice in his comments and actions” (Habel, *Job*, 89). 1 Kgs 22:20–23 shows that not all of the spirits that report to God at his throne are good, since one was willing to be a “deceiving spirit” in the mouth of Ahab’s prophets.

instrument to teach him humility and dependence upon God, yet was simultaneously “a messenger of Satan” (2 Cor 12:7-9).

A Possible Return to Eden Motif

Eliphaz argues that when divine discipline is finished and a person has become righteous, God will give him a trouble free, blessed (אַשְׁרָיָה) life in harmony with nature (5:17-26). He will be protected from calamities (5:19) and even in times of famine he will be rescued from death (5:20). He will have a covenant with the stones of the field so that he has abundant crops (5:23). This suggests a reversal on the curse on the ground due to the Fall of Adam, which resulted in hard work to produce crops (Gen 3:17-19).¹⁸ Wild animals will not hurt him (5:22), which returns to the harmony between Adam and the animals in Eden (Gen 2:19-20) and perhaps reflects a reversal of the enmity between the serpent’s seed and the woman’s seed (Gen 3:15). He will have a long life with health to the end (5:26), which is a reversal of death which Adam’s sin brought to the human race (Gen 2:17; 3:22).

This is a restoration to Eden motif in which the curse due to the Fall is reversed. But it is on a personal level rather than a national eschatology or a new creation as is typical elsewhere in the Bible. Isa 11:6-9 describes an eschatological harmony in nature that will affect all creation. Hos 2:18 expresses similar concepts to Job 5: “In that day I will also make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field . . . and will make them lie down in safety.” This uses the same word for covenant (בְּרִית) as Job 5:17 and many aspects of harmony with nature are similar. But Hosea promises an eschatological blessing for the righteous remnant of Israel as a people, rather than for righteous individuals today as Eliphaz expects.

On one level this is a triumphalist “health and wealth” theology that does not fit God’s response to Job (ch. 38-41) or the prologue. The rest of the Bible says this perfect harmony with nature does not come in this life, but will come in the eschatological new creation.

Nevertheless, like so many concepts in the speeches of Job’s friends, there is an element of truth in Eliphaz’s theology, even if he misuses it. It reflects a hope for a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature that other Scriptures promise will come in the last days (Hos 2:18-23; Isa 11:6-9; 65:17-25; Rom 8:21). In addition, it has ethical implications for righteous people, who should seek a harmonious relationship with the environment, even if nature will not be perfected until the new earth comes.

The Function of Nature References in the Theodicy of Job

The most distinctive aspect of the nature references in Job is how nature functions in the rhetorical argument to explain the sufferings of Job. Nature metaphors and explicit references to God’s involvement in nature are a very important part of the arguments of the various speakers. References to nature are particularly central in the prologue and in God’s response to Job and thus are central to the theodicy presented in the book.

Figures of Speech Using Nature

All speakers use figures of speech with nature to build their case for an explanation of Job’s suffering. These figures of speech enrich the poetry with vivid imagery.

¹⁸ Stones in a field represents infertility. In Matt 13:5 the stony soil is infertile. In 2 Kgs 3:19, 25 stones were cast into the fields of a defeated enemy to prevent them from growing crops. Clines, *Job 1-20*, 152.

Job often expresses his grief in figurative language using nature. For example, in his anguish Job curses the day of his birth (3:8) and says, “Let the stars of its twilight be darkened; Let it wait for light but have none, And let it not see the breaking dawn, Because it did not shut the opening of my mother’s womb” (3:9-10a). Job uses poetic language to express his wish that the day of his birth had never began, so that he would not have been born.¹⁹

Several types of figurative language involving nature are used in the book of Job:

(1) *Simile*: This is the most common type of figure of speech in the book of Job. Job says concerning his accusers, “My brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams” (6:15 NIV). Job says that they “hunt me like a lion” (10:16). Job laments that human life is short lived and full of trouble: “Like a flower he comes forth and withers” (14:2; also 5:25-26; 6:16-17; 6:26; 7:9; 8:16-19; 9:25-26; 10:9-11; 11:16; 14:2, 11-12; 18:3; 20:7; 21:18; 24:5, 24; 27:18; 29:18, 23; 30:15; 34:7).²⁰

(2) *Metaphor*: Bildad says Job’s “words are a blustering wind” (8:2). He mockingly says that Job’s trust is placed in a spider’s web, suggesting he has a fragile basis for his confidence (8:14; cf. 27:17, which uses a simile with the spider web; also 4:8, 10-11; 29:6, 18-19).

(3) *Comparison to nature*: Zophar says, “Can you fathom the mysteries of God? . . . Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea” (11:7-9 NIV). Sometimes the comparison to nature is negative. Job says, “There is hope for a tree, when it is cut down, that it will sprout again, . . . But man dies and lies prostrate. Man expires, and where is he?” (14:7-10) This means that although a tree that is cut down may send out shoots from the stump, when a man dies there is no hope (also 14:11-12; 11:17; 6:3; 8:16-17).

(4) *Personification*: Job challenges his accusers to “speak to the earth, and let it teach you” (12:8; cf. 16:18).²¹ In this passage, he similarly urges them to speak to animals, birds and fish, because all nature knows that God’s hand is behind what has happened to Job (12:7-10; also 5:23; 38:12-13 [“command the morning”]; 20:27 [“earth will rise up against” the wicked]; 40:20).

(5) *Merismus*: In this figure of speech, two extremes combine to represent a larger reality, such as when people in the east and west refer to all humanity (18:20). Zophar says regarding the wicked man, “the heavens will reveal his iniquity, and the earth will rise up against him” (20:27).²² Here “heavens” and “earth” mean all creation, which he believes will expose Job’s wickedness. A merismus joining God’s activities in the “sky” and the “sea” express God’s comprehensive involvement in the operation of the weather (36:30).²³ Animals on earth, birds in

¹⁹ In 3:8, Job calls on those who are able to “raise Leviathan” to curse the day of his birth. Leviathan in this context refers to a mythological sea monster who could swallow the sun or moon and bring an eclipse. The author uses a borrowed metaphor to express poetically Job’s wish for an eclipse or darkening of the day of his birth (cf. vv. 4-6, which refer to an eclipse; Smick, 101-02).

²⁰ For an extensive discussion of nature similes in Job and other biblical wisdom literature, see Katherine J. Dell, “Green Ideas in the Wisdom Tradition,” *SJT* 47, no. 4 (1994): 438-44.

²¹ A. B. Davidson, *The Book of Job* (1918; reprint, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1962), 90, believes “earth” is a metonymy of subject meaning all the lower forms of life on the earth.

²² This reflects international treaty language, which calls heaven and earth as a witness (Clines, *Job 1-20*, 497). Habel, *Job*, 319, believes Zophar is mocking Job’s claim in 16:18-19 that a witness in heaven would testify to his innocence and the earth would not cover his blood. Instead Zophar says both heaven and earth will “rise up in court” against Job.

²³ Job 36:30 says God spreads lightning around him in the sky and is also involved in the depth of the sea. This merismus shows God’s comprehensive involvement in the weather. Alden, 357-58, says the merismus “points to the all-encompassing effect of the storm.” However, the purpose is to magnify God’s involvement in the controlling the details of nature (cf. Anderson, 263).

heaven and fish in the sea represent all animals, which will teach Job about God's ways (12:7-8).²⁴ In 11:5-7, the inscrutableness of God's comprehensive knowledge is shown through both vertical and horizontal spatial dimensions: "high as the heavens," "deeper than Sheol," "longer than the earth," and "broader than the sea. (also 3:8 [day and night = always]; 8:16-17 [shoots and roots = the whole plant, which is itself a metaphor for the wicked man]; 16:7-8; 29:18; 37:3; 38:19 [light and darkness])

Lessons Drawn From Nature

Lessons taken from observing nature illustrate arguments about the human relationship with God. Frequently these appear in the form of proverbs, often with rhetorical questions: Job defends his right to complain about his circumstances by describing normal animal behavior: "Does the wild donkey bray over his grass, Or does the ox low over his fodder?" (6:5) The rhetorical questions expect an emphatic denial. An animal that receives sufficient food does not cry out, just as Job would not if he were not suffering.²⁵ Bildad uses a proverb to accuse Job of turning from God: "Can the papyrus grow up without a marsh? Can the rushes grow without water? . . . So are the paths of all who forget God" (8:11, 13a; cf. vv. 16-19; Ps 1). Zophar makes the witty and cynical observation: "An idiot will become intelligent When the foal of a wild donkey is born a man" (11:12), or as the English proverb says, "when pigs fly." Zophar believes it is impossible for a stupid man (lit. "hollow" or "empty headed")²⁶ to become intelligent, although he later says that he believes Job is not stupid and therefore will repent of his sin so God can restore him (11:13-18).

Characteristics of various aspects of nature are often assumed. For example, when Bildad says Job's trust is placed in a spider's web (8:14), he is thinking of the spider web as fragile and easily broken (at least by a human), not its extraordinary strength for its thickness. The poetic parallelism with "whose confidence is fragile" shows that this aspect of the metaphor is in view. In 4:10-11, Eliphaz says a lion with broken teeth will surely die. The wicked are frequently compared to lions in Psalms and Proverbs (Ps 7:3[2]; 17:12; 22:14[13], 22 [21]; 35:17; 58:7[6]; Prov 28:15; cf. 1QH 5.9-10) and lions were often used in Akkadian proverbs for self-asserting people.²⁷ Eliphaz uses this proverb both to accuse Job of wickedness and to warn that an unforeseeable calamity can suddenly strike and bring down even the powerful.²⁸

Observations from nature are sometimes used in a logical argument from greater to lesser: Bildad says, "How then can a man be just with God? . . . If even the moon has no brightness and the stars are not pure in His sight, how much less man, that maggot?" (25:4-6a) Bildad argues that if the moon and stars, despite all their glory, are imperfect in their light, then how much more is a human being unable to be completely righteous? By "imperfect light," apparently he has in mind that the moon goes dark every month and the stars twinkle. This phenomenological

²⁴ In 12:8, earth and sea is also a merism for everywhere in nature. If Davidson, 90 is correct that "earth" is a metonymy for animals on earth, then 12:8 is a merism with animals on earth and fish in the sea to mean all animals.

²⁵ "As it is natural and instinctive for a hungry ass or ox to bray and bellow, so a man in pain will cry out." (Pope, 50) The reference to both a wild animal (wild donkey) and a domesticated animal (ox) creates a merism suggesting this is the normal behavior of all animals.

²⁶ HALOT, נָבִיחַ.

²⁷ J. M. Roberts, "The Young Lions of Psalm 34,11," *Bib* 54 (1973): 265-67.

²⁸ Clines, *Job 1-20*, 128. Alden, 85, however, says the proverb shows that "the strong and oppressive will ultimately receive their due."

description of the moon and stars is a good analogy to support his claim that no human is without sin and therefore, by implication, that Job should admit to his own sin.

When God speaks to Job from the whirlwind (ch. 38-42), he calls for Job to consider various aspects of nature. He recounts the behavior of various wild animals and asks Job to notice God's care for them. God has not abandoned his creation, including Job. This message will be discussed in detail later, but it is worth noting here that God's answer to Job is built around an elaborate description of God's involvement in the perfect operation of various parts of nature, including animals, plants, weather and celestial bodies.

The Use of Nature in Explaining Suffering

The prose prologue of the book explains that Job's sufferings are due to Satan's manipulation of nature (ch. 1-2). The corruption of nature by hidden evil powers is part of the explanation of suffering in this world. Yet the prologue says that Satan does not have unlimited power to inflict diseases and natural disasters on people. Satan's ability to use nature to cause suffering is limited to the degree that God permits it in each individual's case. God is still ultimately in control and restrains evil.

The poetic body of the book explores God's relationship to nature. The overall message is that God is in control of all the details, despite what the suffering in the world might suggest. Since God controls nature and wisely manages it, Job should also trust God with his own life.

God's speech to Job out of the whirlwind (ch. 38-41) is the most powerful picture of God's relationship to nature in wisdom literature and perhaps in the whole Bible. God tells Job that his suffering is not a punishment for sin, but unfortunately God does not explain much more about why Job is suffering (including the part Satan played in his woes). The elaborate descriptions of nature and God's orderly management of it stress that since God is sovereignly in control of the universe he created, Job should trust God to take care of him as well.

God stresses the wonder of creation and the awe humans should feel in its presence. The description of the operation of nature magnifies God's sovereignty and transcendence over creation. It also shows that humanity is insignificant by comparison and thus has no right to challenge how God runs the universe (40:6-14). God knows the secrets of how nature operates, but humanity does not (38:16-30). God asks Job rhetorical questions to show the limits of human knowledge of how God takes care of the universe. Was Job there when God created the world, so that he knows exactly how God created things (38:4-11)? Does he know the secrets of source of the seas (38:16) or exactly what the afterlife is like (38:17)? Does he know how the weather operates (38:22-30) or the laws of the movements of the heavenly bodies (38:33)? Does he know exactly when each individual wild animal gives birth (39:1-4)? God tells Job that he should have humility since, compared to God, humans know very little of creation and how it works. Zophar earlier anticipated this argument when he told Job he would never attain God's comprehensive knowledge (shown by the merism of heaven, Sheol, earth and seas; 11:5-9).

God is in control of all of life, despite how things might appear when a person is in the midst of suffering (38:22-23). God asks a series of rhetorical questions to show that Job has no control over aspects of nature that are trivial for God (38:12-23, 31-41). God commands the morning (38:12) and determines the weather (38:34-38). He assigned places for the constellations (38:31-33) and created wisdom that he gives to human minds (38:36). God manages all the wild animals as if they were his personal menagerie of beloved pets (39:5-30) and provides food for each one (38:39-41). He controls even the mightiest of wild animals on land and in sea, even those which humans have difficulty capturing and subduing, such as behemoth, a mighty land

animal (40:15-24) and leviathan, a powerful sea creature (41:1-34). God has comprehensive power over nature, but man does not. Hence Job has no right to question how God runs the universe. God says to Job:

Will you really annul My judgment?
 Will you condemn Me that you may be justified?
 Or do you have an arm like God,
 And can you thunder with a voice like His? (40:8-9)²⁹

God says that he will not explain everything to Job about why he is suffering because God created nature and has complete control over it and man does not (38:4). Therefore, God the sovereign creator and sustainer of all life has a right to act as he wishes and to not reveal the secrets of his plans to humans. After hearing God's message, Job abandons his anthropocentric view of life and trusts the sovereign God to do right, even if he cannot understand God's reasons (42:1-5)

Practical Implications for a Christian Theology of Nature and Ecological Ethics

The book of Job has some important implications for forming a Christian theology of nature as well as ecological ethics. Christian ecological ethics should be founded on a good biblical theology of nature. Certainly the book of Job does not present the whole biblical picture of nature, but it suggests several important pieces of the puzzle:

1. *Reflection on nature should point us to the majesty and sovereign power of God in action.* God's answer to Job about his suffering stresses the wonder of creation and the awe that humans should feel in its presence. As we reflect on nature, we should feel humility in light of the smallness of our knowledge and our power compared to God. The Apostle Paul expresses a similar idea in Rom 1:19-20, where he says that reflection on nature shows the existence and basic attributes of God.
2. *Christians should value and respect nature as part of God's good creation.* God has great delight in the natural world that he created (39:5-30; cf. Gen 1:10, *et al*, "God saw that it was good"). Similarly, Gen 2:9 says that God planted some trees in the Garden of Eden simply because they were "pleasing to the sight." Since God values and delights in nature, so should we. As Richard Young correctly notes, "To love God is to love what God loves."³⁰
3. *Human beings are part of nature, yet exalted above nature.* Humans share the material nature of animals, yet they are the pinnacle of God's creation and have a spiritual nature, with moral accountability and a capacity to know God. This biblical view of humanity sharply contrasts with most secular environmentalists who view humanity either simply as another animal or as a usurper of nature.

²⁹ Job's own speech in chapter 9 anticipates God's argument in chapters 38-41. He says that God controls earthquakes and the sun and he stretches out the stars in specific constellations (9:5-9). Therefore, how can anyone argue with God or accuse him of injustice? (9:14-20)

³⁰ Young, *Healing*, 95. Young has an excellent discussion of the biblical evidence that God intended nature to be enjoyed by humanity (pp. 94-95).

4. *Nature should not be viewed purely from an anthropocentric and utilitarian perspective, only in terms of how it benefits humans.* Some parts of nature have no direct value to humanity. Dyrness says, “If we are right in seeing God’s purposes as central to the created order and as our calling to reflect the order of these purposes in our lives, we are also relieved of the pressure to make creation at every point useful for human society.”³¹ The book of Job reflects a theocentric view of nature, which is consistent with other parts of the Bible. God values nature in itself and he created it to bring him glory. One of the flaws in the reasoning of both Job and his friends is that they view life purely from how it affects them. Of course, the book of Job does not include the whole biblical view of nature. For example, since God gave man the plants of the Garden of Eden for his benefit and told him to cultivate the ground (Gen 2:5, 15) , this implies that all of nature does not need to be kept in a totally wild state. This establishes a precedent that nature can be used for human benefit and modifications to the ecosystem, such as a dam, are not necessarily wrong.
5. *A Christian view of ecology must include God as one part of the system of interconnected relationships.* Ecology is the study of the interdependency of all beings. No theory of ecological systems is complete if it fails to include God’s work as creator and sustainer of all things. “The perception of God as creator rather than as a nature God means that nature cannot be understood without God.”³² Other views of ecology are inadequate in part for this reason. There are three major ways God is conceived in relationship to nature in ecological systems:
- a. *God is not part of the ecological picture.* Secular environmentalists ignore God as a matter of principle and view nature as a closed system. Nature is self-sustaining with no involvement by God. Yet without a recognition of God and his part in creating and sustaining the universe, nature and ecology will never be completely or properly understood.
 - b. *God is closely connected to nature.* The vacuum of secular ecological approaches has led some ecologists to seek to bring God into the picture, but without clearly separating the creator from his creation: (1) Process theology claims God is influenced by nature and changes along with his creation. (2) New age religion is fascinated by neo-paganism with its worship of “mother earth” and North American native religions, which worship the spirits of mountains, trees and streams. (3) The view of earth as a sentient organism, often called “Gaia”, is gaining popularity. All of these views fail to adequately distinguish the creature from the creator. Job clearly shows nature as dependent upon God, not the other way around. Similarly, in Rom 1:18-23, the Apostle Paul says worshiping nature usurps the reverence due the true creator and leads to moral corruption, since a transcendent basis for ethics is removed.

³¹ Dyrness, 52-53.

³² Dell, 444.

- c. *God is creator and sustainer of nature, but distinct from nature.* God created nature and is involved in its operation, yet he remains distinct from nature. Richard Austin describes what is distinctive about the biblical view of nature:

Where we see predation and adaptation in an ecosystem of mutual support, the Hebrew poet saw the Lord directly feeding the lion and the raven, and acting as midwife for the successful birth of a fawn. This perspective need not embarrass modern Christians. We can appreciate how environmental systems are expressive of God's beauty in that the Lord not only creates but also bestows creativity upon the earth. Because earthly life is creative, with inner resources as well as interdependence, it can respond to God. Yet modern men and women need God's words to Job to remind us that the Lord is an active participant in the life of the world. Neither passive nor remote, the Lord cares about the antelope in labor and feels the pain and joy of all who live.³³

6. *The influence of evil on nature must be taken seriously.* Suffering makes no sense without the recognition that not everything in nature is as it once was or as God originally intended. (1) Evil spiritual beings abuse nature. The Book of Job shows that Satan uses diseases and natural disasters and the Gospels show that Jesus healed people who were ill due to demonic influence. (2) The Fall and human sin impact nature. Gen 3:15-17 says that the Fall of humanity damaged nature. Although Job only hints at the curse on the ground, it is a very important part of a biblical understanding nature as it now exists. For example, Jesus' miracles often locally reversed the damage of the fall and anticipated the new earth, by calming storms, healing disease, raising the dead, and making nature superproductive by multiplying bread and fish.
7. *Human beings should join with God in reversing the effect of sin on nature.* God cares for his creatures and sets the model for human treatment of nature (cf. Gen 1:26-28 – the dominion God gave humanity over nature is connected with being created in the image of God). The book of Job says a righteous person will have a harmonious relationship with nature (5:17-26). Yet other parts of the Bible emphasize that the final hope for the environment rests in God, who will one day reverse the damage of the Fall and restore the paradise conditions of nature in a new earth.

Conclusions

References to nature are interwoven throughout the book of Job and serve the theodicy of the book. Figures of speech using nature and explanations of God's involvement in nature help support the explanation of suffering.

Job shows that nature is part of God's good creation and has value apart from its utility to humanity. Although there is evil in the world and Satan uses nature to try to push God's people to turn from God, nature is not itself fallen or evil. God is in control of nature and sustains its life through his direct involvement in its operation. God even uses suffering and temptations that come through Satan's manipulation of nature for his good purposes in a believer's life. The

³³ Richard Cartwright Austin, *Hope for the Land. Nature in the Bible* (John Knox: Atlanta, 1987), 48.

sovereign creator and sustainer of all nature has the right to do as he wishes. A righteous person should trust God to do right, even when God does not explain the purposes of his suffering.

The book of Job only offers part of the very important puzzle of a Christian theology of nature. For example, Job does not refer to God's plan to reverse the curse from the Fall and to bring a new creation, in which nature and humanity live in perfect harmony. Nevertheless, the teachings of Job on nature are an essential part of a biblical view of nature and are foundational to developing a Christian system of ecological ethics.