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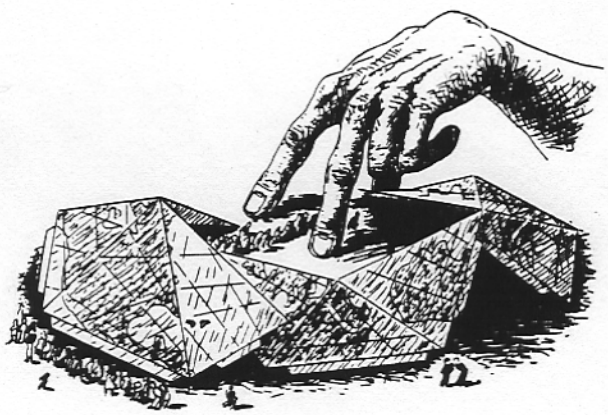


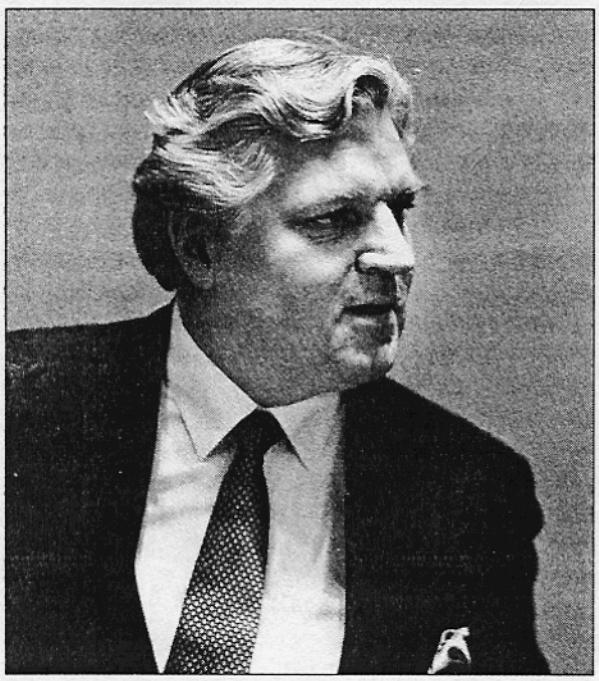
In Dust and Ashes

The Environmental Crisis in Religious Perspective

by Timothy C. Weiskel

> *Then Job answered to the LORD: . . .*
> *"Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,*
> *things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . .*
> *I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,*
> *but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself*
> *and repent in dust and ashes." Job 41:3-6*

At the heart of our current ecological crisis is a more fundamental theological problem of Divine control and human arrogance. In effect, we are up against the limits of human understanding, yet we fail to acknowledge this. We cannot even muster the humility to recognize that, in system-wide terms, we are the problem. Our inability even to recognize this formulation of the issue has exacerbated the multiple manifestations of our environmental crisis. We seek feverishly to meddle with ecological processes and channel the entropic flow of energy to our own intentions as if the entire handiwork of creation were put in place simply for our human needs.



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This is not a new conceit. Humans have engaged in it for as long as history has been recorded in agricultural civilizations. It is the oldest and most profound theological problem in world religions, for at stake is a fundamental theological assessment of Divine intention and human agency in the natural history of our world. Preliterate religious traditions of foraging societies or non-grain-based agricultures (by far the majority of human cultural experience) may well have avoided these theological quandaries, but they remain central in the thought and belief traditions of cultures based upon the systematic surplus production of grain reserves. They have become pervasive in the modern world because over the last 500 years grain-based agricultural systems have marginalized or exterminated all other forms of agricultural production worldwide.

We can no longer embark naively upon an analysis of our ecological circumstance as if it were simply a techno-scientific or managerial problem. We must acknowledge that we come to the problem with a particular set of beliefs. As liberation and feminist theologians have so successfully pointed out, we all emerge from a tradition with all its pre-conceptual baggage. This too must be accounted for and examined in our inquiry. We cannot simply assume that our cherished religious beliefs will be helpful in addressing our environmental crisis, for they may, in fact, be a major source of the problem at hand.

The nature of our predicament becomes apparent when we view the emergence of Judeo-Christian beliefs in historical context. Briefly put, several important world religions emerged out of the specific phase of human socio-political evolution associated with the rise of grain-based agricultural city-states and trading polities in the circum-Mediterranean. This period represented a breakthrough in the ability of humankind to organize itself in order to harness new forms of energy and modify local ecosystemic processes.

The social formulation of belief systems over this period broadly paralleled the techno-social

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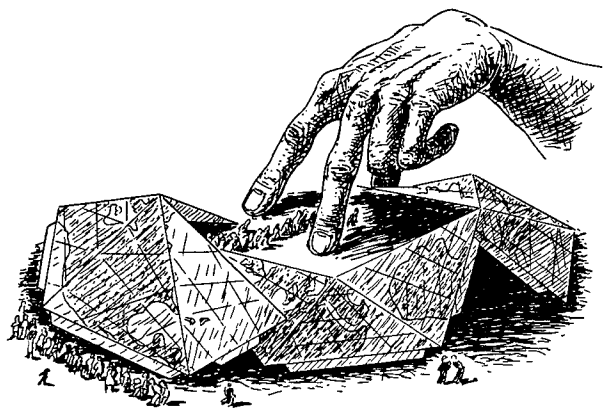
evolution in the circum-Mediterranean. The processes involved in continuous grain cultivation are specialized and complex and involve the restructuring of natural ecosystems for human purposes. Having mastered these techniques, human communities, and particularly their elites, often mistook themselves for masters of nature, forgetting that every agricultural system necessarily remains but a small subsystem of the larger ecosystem. Having mistaken the part for the whole, Middle Eastern religions developed insights that remain fragmented, highly partial, or palpably absurd when it comes to understanding the organizational principles or functional integrity of the entire ecosystem or the proper role of humans in the natural world. Rather than focusing upon the dazzling complexity and incomprehensible wonder of the natural world, the religious traditions of the ancient Middle East have canonized mytho-poetic narratives that bolster a sense of human self-importance in the ecosystem.

To the extent that we remain wedded to these mytho-poetic narratives, our religious tradition may shackle us at this point, preventing us from acting responsibly and effectively. The bulk of our traditional religious texts and beliefs are of little help in understanding or responding to our current ecological circumstance. In fact, they may be downright destructive of the kind of sensibility we need to cultivate in order to survive the coming decades.

Consider, for example, the irreducible anthropocentrism of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Humankind is conceived of as having been made in the image of the Divine creative power. Humans are, in a sense, a little lower than angels. Both Jewish and Christian formulations of belief invest history itself with particular importance because in history, they assert, Divine intention is manifest. Passages from sacred texts within these traditions are frequently cited by devout believers in order to invest various forms of human ecological arrogance with Divine intention, as if the human purposes of a "chosen people" mirror Divine intention for the system as a whole. Emphasis throughout the narrative canon is placed initially on the importance of covenant and subsequently on the parallel importance of confession. In the Hebrew tradition the act and fact of covenant between a God and "his people" empowers and authorizes them to act. Simultaneously, this covenant renders their actions meaningful in history, for they manifest God's reputed intent.

In the later Christian formulation, the engage-



ment between mankind and God is more individualized and personalized, as befits the increasingly urbanized historical context of the late Roman empire. Christ's challenge, "Follow me," is a personal appeal. The confession of faith is essentially a political act, as Peter's denials underscore. The act of faith is marked by an individual recognition of Jesus as the Christ and a confession of him as the "risen Lord."

In both the Jewish and Christian traditions the salvational message is focused upon the devotion, the will, the intention, and the commitment of a faithful community or individual. As the socio-political organization of the Palestine region was transformed from pastoral nomadism to sedentary agriculture, religious imagery shifted from pastoral and natural metaphors to political kingdom metaphors. The pastoral tradition is not fully lost, but it is submerged to a larger vision of political triumph. Christ is depicted as "the Lamb of God" on the way to becoming the "King of Kings." For Christians, salvation is as-

sured to those who confess the "Risen Lord." By the time of the Christian scriptures, several new moral injunctions are added to the received Jewish commandments, and central to these is the love of one's neighbor along with a love of God with all one's being. But again, the focus is almost exclusively upon the moral politics of interaction between putatively personalized beings. Moral norms for behavior are spelled out in terms of appropriate social relations between *persons.*

Where in all of this is an obligation to the natural world or the myriad of creatures that inhabit it? Why is not salvation formulated in terms of moral behavior with reference to them? Or with reference to a larger logic of sustained husbandry of natural resources? Although these elements are not entirely absent from the received Judeo-Christian tradition, they are minor by comparison with the burden of the salvation narrative in the canon. Where these elements do exist they have historically been marginalized in subsequent interpretive traditions. Jesus may have spent 40 days in the wilderness in order to focus on the mission before him, but despite occasional nature-based parables, he does not point to the natural world for sustained insight, counsel, or the source of moral imperative in his teaching. Emerging as a prophet figure in the context of a peripheral province of a late Roman colonial empire, his message is largely one of a new politics of justice and love—not a new poetics of human limit in the natural world.

The religious traditions of the ancient Middle East have canonized mythopoetic narratives that bolster a sense of human self-importance in the ecosystem.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the modern world we in the Judeo-Christian tradition are so deaf to the natural world. During his first presidential campaign George Bush, while talking of toxic waste and ocean beach pollution, announced that 1988 was the year that our environment began to "talk back" in response to the abuse it has suffered. In reality, the environment has been "talking back" to mankind for centuries, indeed millennia. What is striking in retrospect is our seeming inability or refusal as a culture—perhaps even as a species—to hear what it has been saying.

The message we should have heard is simple: all civilizations depend ultimately on the ecological viability of their primary productivity, that is, their agricultural base and their forest regeneration. Those cultures whose agro-ecosystems destroy topsoil, squander fossil water, or deplete plant genetic resources are destined over time to experience either permanent dependence upon other cultures or certain and often sudden ecological decline of their own.

The environmental archaeology of ancient civilizations makes this dramatically apparent. Urban-based agricultural societies of the ancient Near East frequently reached population densities that exceeded the capacity of the land to produce food on a sustainable basis (its "carrying capacity"). Techniques of agricultural intensification—terracing, crop selection, animal husbandry, irrigation—were devised to meet repeated crises of production. Despite short-term improvements in output, however, the long-term consequences of these technologies were not foreseeable by early agricultural innovators. Problems of over-grazing, watershed deforestation, soil erosion, siltation, water-logging, soil salinization, and crop blight often emerged as the long-term consequences of earlier innovations, sometimes leaving whole regions permanently destroyed for agricultural use. The dynamic involved in the rise and fall of ancient civilizations contained an irreducible ecological component.

Since the discovery of the New World, predatory expansive agriculture and parasitic resource use have characterized European civilization, leading some emergent cultures—including our own—to believe in a mythology of expanding "frontiers." It is important to realize that increases in agricultural output over most of this period

were accounted for not so much by improvements in basic agronomic technology as by the overall expansion of the land surface under cultivation. While total production rose dramatically, productivity per acre and productivity per unit of energy input often declined. Nevertheless, profits from total agricultural surpluses helped to finance the emergence of urban-based industrial systems. The dynamic of industrial growth served, in turn, to sustain the mythology of "unlimited frontiers" and further transformed these frontier myths into a belief in perpetual economic growth. Having expanded upon the things in nature, the West came to believe that expansion was in the nature of things. Perpetual growth was considered natural, good, and inevitable.

The European experience of overseas expansion and the ensuing pattern of industrialization has engendered deep-seated habits of thought and images of cultural self-perception. In our day these images and mental metaphors leave the industrial world poorly equipped to construct a viable system of stable production in our finite circumstance. In effect, we are trying to sustain a "frontier culture" in a post-frontier world. Little wonder that our environmental policy is so embarrassingly immature.

We need urgently to reassess this circumstance, for the world cannot long endure our blind environmental blunders. We need to learn that ultimately there are no frontiers in an ecosystem. No one element in an ecosystem can continue to grow indefinitely — including human populations. To pretend otherwise will simply contribute to the system's overall instability and eventual collapse. These are elementary insights of the science of ecology, yet in the Judeo-Christian tradition we are a long way from acknowledging their fundamental truth, partially, I suspect, because of our enduring belief in covenantal and confessional religion. These kinds of religion are grounded in the socio-politics of social justice and personal love, but they often ignore or seek to refute the eco-logic of human limit.

In reality, no amount of re-affirmed covenants or personal confessions will assure mankind salvation from the large-scale ecosystemic transformations that currently face us as a people and a species. Mankind will not be an exception to system-wide perturbations that seem imminent on a global scale. Covenantal exceptionalism, Christian exceptionalism, American exceptionalism, or techno-rational exceptionalism are all

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forms of belief that only serve to hinder a sober assessment of human limit.

In the contemporary world ecological problems are global in scope, and we will need to develop a matching vision to address them effectively. Tropical deforestation affects both local weather and world-wide climate. Currently, global ecological crises are most pronounced in the Third World. These regions have the most fragile ecosystems and the weakest economies in the modern world. The tragic floods of Bangladesh make this brutally apparent, exposing the vulnerability of agricultural production for millions of people. Such regions are the "weak links" in an ecological chain that binds us all to each other. Even if only for reasons of public health, we cannot afford to think—as the AIDS epidemic demonstrates—that problems in the Third World are merely the Third World's problem.

In order to survive in the coming decades we will need to transform global agro-ecosystems away from petro-subsidized and toward bio-sustainable forms of agricultural technology. We cannot predicate our agriculture on fossil fuels and expect it to outlast the supply. Unless steps are taken in the future to reverse the rapid increase in global dependence upon petroleum-based agriculture, we can expect wide-scale dislocations including famine, disease, and armed conflict to emerge on an expanding scale as supplies of that non-renewable resource decline and competition to control its use intensifies.

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ture, but it is important to remember that there is no such thing as a "post-agricultural" society. Policy decisions concerning agriculture, our environment, and the future provision of public works (water projects, transport systems, land-use patterns, etc.) need to reflect this fundamental truth. Cultures that failed to understand this in the past proved to be short-lived, often suffering rapid collapse as warring polities challenged one another for control of dwindling resources. We will be no exception to this general pattern in human history.

It would be extremely foolhardy in the coming years to shape our environment and continue to construct the infrastructure of our society in a manner that commits global agricultural production irretrievably to a non-renewable resource. This is a recipe for extinction. Action to avert future catastrophe must begin now. There are those who would argue that African famines are already the advanced signs of a highly vulnerable world food system subject to wide-scale catastrophe in the coming decades.

If the Christian community is to have anything to offer its adherents in the decades ahead, specific efforts need to be made now to reformulate fundamental images and operative concepts in its theology. To put it plainly, our concept of God is too small for the problems at hand.

The Theological Challenge

It is the task of theologians to forge convincing and compelling imagery of Divine intention and human responsibility in the concrete circumstances they encounter within their faith communities. They must of necessity draw upon the tradition from which they come, but there is a rich variety they have largely left un-tapped in the Judeo-Christian and broader Near Eastern traditions. In that region of the world, periods of ecological decline in the past have led time and time again to fundamental theological reformulations in agricultural societies. This is so because basic operating principles have had to be rethought in the context of what is presumed to be Divinely intended and what is known to be humanly possible.

New, more generalized, less personal, more judgmental, and more terrible images of God appear from these periods. Humans need to make sense of the inevitable limits they encounter as urban-based agricultural civilizations repeatedly overshoot their carrying capacity and collapse. "Acts of God" commonly provide meaning in the explanatory void, and God gains quite a severe reputation in the process.

Whether contemporary liberal Christians can conceive of collective human destruction as an "act of God" remains to be seen. System-wide destruction has remained comfortably remote since the time of Noah. Even in retelling this myth we reassure ourselves that God saved a faithful servant. In fact, covenantal and confessional faiths may be inherently ill-equipped to envision this possibility because of their lingering and desperate belief in various forms of exceptionalism. From the Exodus tradition, to the Noah devastation myth, through the prophets, to the Christian narratives themselves, salvation is assured in this religious tradition to those who reaffirm the covenant, turn from their "sinful" ways, and personally confess their faith. The "faithful" are assured of being exceptions to the general devastation that will be wrought by a jealous, judgmental, and vindictive God.

It may be to other aspects of our own tradition or other traditions altogether that theologians need now to turn to assess our environmental circumstance. It will not do to leave the public articulation of belief to scientists or politicians. Their belief in techno-rational exceptionalism is occupationally instilled and is likely to harden as the crisis deepens around us. In the coming years we can probably expect a new kind of techno-scientific fundamentalism to appeal for our belief and support along with other more conventional forms of religious fundamentalism. In Judeo-Christian religion, however, we at least have a tradition of prophecy, judgment, and apocalypse to call upon for discerning and articulating meaning in troubled times. It is time to get down to this task.

Our theological imagination will have to stretch itself to include in its explanatory framework the large-scale and seemingly irreversible ecological perturbations that are likely to occur within our lifetime or that of our children. Even if the tragedy of a "nuclear winter" is averted through the control and dismantling of the nuclear arsenal, ecological reversals of global scope nevertheless seem imminent.

Current rates of global climate change suggest, for example, that massive dislocations of human societies are possible in the next century. Greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere are likely to engender a pattern of warming throughout the globe. This is projected to lead to a rise in sea levels worldwide. Since much of the world's population as well as its agricultural and industrial infrastructure lies within a few meters of current sea level, the expansion of the sea will require massive adjustments for societies around the globe. Countries like Bangladesh could require the relocation of tens of millions of citizens and the reorganization of their entire agricultural infrastructure.

Even in areas not directly affected by coastal sea-level rise, unprecedented patterns of severe and unpredictable weather are likely to be experienced. This may well lead to erratic shifts in grain production. Some of the production irregularities will be driven directly by weather anomalies, like droughts or floods. Others will most likely result from the outbreak of new forms of pests, blights, and predators that are usually unleashed in rapidly changing conditions. The net effect could well be that customary patterns of surplus food production—common in the western world since World War II—cannot be counted on indefinitely in the future.

Since much of the Third World, including 22 African countries, have come to depend for a large portion of their annual food supply upon western grain surpluses, famine will become rampant in the Third World. Under these conditions, the seeming victory of Western medical science over various forms of disease may well prove to be short-lived in historical terms. Food shortages will lead to malnutrition and civil unrest, and stimulate inter-regional and possibly inter-continental migrations.

The theological question is this: Is our concept of God big enough to encompass and account for this pattern of imminent systemic upheaval? "What kind of a God could let this happen?" The question will demand an answer. Professional theologians are not as yet up to the challenge, for few of them see the scope of the problem nor are they stirred by its imminence. Too many of them seem to cling to a kind of pious belief that surely the suffering or destruction of mankind could not be God's intent. If such things come to pass, they argue, surely they are the result of human shortsightedness, greed, weakness—in short, various forms of sin. Contrition and resolve to live in a new way is the key to salvation, they suggest.

Yet what if this is not the case? What if a system-wide collapse is in store for us or our descendants *no matter what we do*? What if the inexorable process of systemic transformation is already underway with mechanisms we are only now just beginning to perceive?

Evolutionary biologists tell us that evolution is proceeding on a scale of one million species destroyed for every one created. Dramatic shifts in the community of life forms have occurred before in the earth's history, but this kind of extinction-creation ratio has never before been documented in the geological record—not even in the devastating period of extinctions surrounding the rapid demise of dinosaur species. The biblical narrative of the flood may have given vivid literary expression to a localized catastrophe, but the archaeological record reveals no evidence of system-wide biotic collapse in biblical times.

By contrast, our own era provides dramatic evidence of this kind of a system-wide catastrophe. Since roughly 1450, we can document the plant genetic collapse of most agricultural systems in the Third World, yet few theologians are openly reflecting upon this as a theological problem. They, like most citizens of the modern world, have assumed that scientists have this process under control and will manage it for human benefit. Neither of these assumptions seems justified. Scientists are just beginning to monitor the extent of the tragedy, and as they do so they tend to accelerate the commoditization of remaining biogenetic material in the natural world. Pharmaceutical and petro-agricultural firms are now scrambling to discover, acquire, and patent the remaining biogenetic material for purposes of private profit.

Beyond the question of whether we are acting responsibly or not as a species in our ecosystem, our ultimate survival could be called into question by slight shifts in larger ecosystemic processes. Human beings, like other mammals, perform very few functions necessary for the operation of the ecosphere's biogeochemical cycles. In the

context of generalized, system-wide biotic simplification, it is not clear that humans will long survive, especially since over the last 500 years we have successfully driven into extinction the genetic varieties of primary producers so crucial for sustaining our food supply.

Can liberal theologians conceive of a God big enough to make massive human suffering and perhaps extinction meaningful? If humankind is made in God's image, what happens to our understanding of God if large and growing numbers suffer and die? What kind of God would will this? Is God perhaps not in control? Or is God merely absent? These are age-old questions. The suffering of the innocent has been a theological conundrum since Job. But just because the questions are old does not mean they have been satisfactorily answered. It seems likely that large-scale suffering of both the "faithful" and the innocent will revive these questions with a new intensity in the coming years. The answers we devise will shape an entirely new theology.

We may find that as a result of several decades of comparative comfort we in the West have domesticated God by making God into a convenient social progressive, generally in favor of the personal liberties and freedoms we enjoy as white, middle-class (male) liberals. This is not sufficient. If "the God for Christian progressives" is all we possess, we are in for a rude theological awakening as collective ecological catastrophe begins to register in our awareness and inscribe itself in our daily experience.

Biblical Scholarship

In the task of reformulating contemporary theology, serious biblical scholarship will be called upon to take the lead. Simply stated the problem is this: have we read the texts completely and correctly? Three types of emphasis can be imagined in the proposed rereading that will be necessary. First, what is the precise Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek vocabulary and imagery used in passages of the texts we wish to submit to a reexamination? Second, what is the specific socio-historical context in which the given text was transcribed or composed? And third, for what reason was this specific text subsequently singled out from many others for inclusion in the sacred canon?

Several obvious passages require further clarification in our current ecological circumstance. These would include but not be limited to the following.

■ **The Creation Myths.** Genesis contains several accounts of how the world was thought to be created. These "charter" myths encapsulate different images of God and humankind, and set out the boundaries of role and behavior in an ordered universe. Humankind is said to have been created in God's image and given "dominion" over the rest of the created world. It is significant that toil and agricultural labor on the land is seen in essentially negative terms. It is a curse resulting from an initial form of disobedience toward God.

This is a far cry from traditions that see agricultural labor with the land as co-creative, fructifying, or spiritually ennobling. What are the specific usages and appropriate semantic fields for each of the terms used in these accounts? When were the different accounts compiled? For what purposes were the differing accounts retained? What stark contrasts exist between these creation narratives and those of other circum-Mediterranean peoples? What parallels are apparent between these traditions? What are the consequences of believing in a "personal" God in the context of an impersonal universe?

■ **The Noah Episode and Narratives of Covenantal Exceptionalism.** What was the historical referent, if any, to the Noah episode? In what ways does Noah's activity clarify the essential covenant relationship between God and faithful mankind? What are the precise terms (nouns *and* verbs) used to convey the idea that "God saw what he had created and it grieved him that he had created man"? What can we make of the image of the rainbow covenant in our day, when system-wide devastation on a scale far exceeding anything traceable in the biblical archaeological record seems now to lie before us?

Is our concept of God big enough to encompass and account for this pattern of imminent systemic upheaval?

Our early understanding of God as presented in the Hebrew texts is often of a quixotic, unpredictable, moody, jealous, erratic, and emotionally inconstant persona. Yet over time God is represented as overcoming these characteristics and settling down to be a dependable, steadfast, and unswervingly trustful persona by the time of the Christian scriptures. God may have become even more domesticated in recent years. It is reassuring to know in a covenantal religion that the other party will always be there to honor its part of the bargain, but this may not be something we can count on. If God is thought to act through natural events and catastrophes the image of God as divine trickster may well reemerge in the coming years.

If, on the other hand, God is essentially "absent" from such catastrophes, what do we make of the initial mythical narratives of Noah? Isn't their overwhelming message that God is in charge—even of system-wide catastrophe? Do we seriously believe this in our day? It is crucial to get at the biblical texts to determine just what understanding of God these quixotic depictions reflect in their original context. Beyond that, it remains to be seen whether such divine imagery is any longer serviceable in our own day.

■ **Prophetic Imagery: Nature and Social Justice.** In many of the texts of the prophets, nature-based imagery is used to characterize the alleged actions of a judgmental and righteous God. Are these simply literary conventions of discourse, or is there an underlying conception of "nature" as the ultimate court of justice? God seems to react to cumulative histories of social injustice and inequity by evoking or acting through natural devastation and restoration cycles. What are the specific ingredients of this imagery? Is it agriculturally based? Is it pastorally based? Is it grounded in a broader "natural science"? Once again, what is the precise vocabulary employed? At what particular points do the naturalistic images of the prophets appear? Why are they conserved as part of the sacred canon?

These are just a few of the puzzling episodes and genres in the Hebrew Bible that could be usefully reexamined in the light of our ecological circumstances.

Christian New Testament scriptures present further problems. What, for example, do we make of all the "faith miracles" in the gospel texts? These narratives seem to suggest that with sufficient faith, the normal operative laws of nature can be suspended so that individuals can be cured of chronic disease or whole crowds can be fed with meager resources. There are several fundamental problems here. Close translations and deliberate textual explications are in order here if any residue of belief is to be retained in our techno-scientific world.

Other central parables of confession may prove equally problematic. Consider the parable of the prodigal son. We are led to believe that after squandering his share of an inheritance the prodigal son comes to his senses and assesses that he could be better off back in his father's opulence. He returns to his father and is received as an honored guest and favored son. In the context of the squandering of current ecological capital by many individuals and corporations in our society, it is disconcerting to contemplate such cheap and easy forgiveness. Surely this text deserves a close rereading, with a careful scrutiny of what is being affirmed.

Beyond the biblical work itself, there is a need to reassess post-scriptural traditions of Christian mysticism and nature-based prose and poetry. Two traditions, often ignored in the main currents of Protestant thinking, may be of particular help in this revaluation. First, the monastic traditions of the Celtic Christians can be examined with profit. Many of the monastic traditions from the Benedictine to the Franciscan may hold insights we need to rediscover. In addition, Eastern Christianity with Greek, Syrian, and Eastern Orthodox traditions may hold valuable lessons for us to acknowledge in Western Christianity. Hebrew theology seems also to be in a period of reassessment as "reconstructionist Jews" reexamine the concept of Jews as the "chosen people." All of these renewals will be nourished and empowered by fresh readings of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts in our religious canon.

Revisiting the "Wisdom" Literature: Job's Answer and Our Predicament

In beginning this task, we can draw some fresh insights from fragments of the biblical literature. Not all biblical texts serve to inflate the sense of covenantal or confessional exceptionalism and self-righteousness. The "wisdom" literature within the Judeo-Christian religious traditions points beyond the narrowness of the social worlds from which it emerged. This literature

emphasizes the larger context of creation in very explicit terms, transcending the fractious social and political strife of agro-pastoral groups in the Iron-Age, Canaanite hill country. The Psalms, the Proverbs, and the book of Job provide this kind of insight. The text of Job serves in particular to remind all who will heed its message that natural process is not ultimately under human control; nor is it answerable to human needs, human logic, or any known sense of human justice.

Job's "comforters" initially interpret the multiple catastrophes that befall him as a manifestation of God's moral judgment. Job protests. He has been righteous and kept all the laws. He feels blameless and cannot fathom the reasons for his misfortunes. Ultimately, neither can they, and they counsel him to "curse God and die."

The irrationality of it all troubles Job, and as tragedy mounts in an unremitting crescendo he is enraged that there seems to be no moral fundament to natural process, no justice in creation. In spite of his demands for reasons and pleas for mercy, tragedy does not subside. Nor does anything seem to make sense. To add insult to injury the text portrays a God that confronts Job with a series of what must be the most bitterly ironic set of rhetorical questions in the history of religious literature: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." (38:2-4)

The interrogation is unrelenting; the effect, devastating. Wearied by contagion, pestilence, and plague, destroyed by famine, fire, and all manner of mishap, Job is invited to behold the creative genius of the Lord's handiwork in nature. Before such majesty he is made to feel small, insignificant, utterly without worth. The rage is dissolved in a new sense of place. The clamoring for reasons and for justice is silenced by a new sense of wonder. The poetry of the text preserves the insight to this day as one of the most compelling statements of human self-recognition in all of recorded history: "Then Job answered the LORD: . . . 'Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.'" (41:3-6)

We, too, have uttered what we did not understand. Scientists, politicians, and religious leaders continue to "darken counsel by words without knowledge," everywhere proclaiming their integrity and claiming to be in charge of one or another group of "chosen people" with a divinely appointed mission. Meanwhile, nature contains within

Job is invited to behold the creative genius of the Lord's handiwork in nature.

itself things too wonderful for us which we do not know. We have heard of its majesty, but only now—as we destroy it—do our eyes begin to see its splendor. In our day, nations engage in armed contests of might and stubbornness that cause ecological destruction on a scale previously unknown in human history.

In evolutionary and geological terms we are contemporaries with Job. Stratigraphically, geologists tell us, we will all appear in the geological record as part of the same transitory human moment in the earth's long history. Theologically, however, we in the modern world are far more primitive than Job. Even though his experience is inscribed in our sacred texts, we have lost sight of Job's fundamental wisdom. He at least had the humility to repent as he beheld the grandeur of nature. Moreover, he learned to resituate himself as a subordinate creature in a world that he recognized to be beyond his comprehension or control.

In our day, we have lost sight of this dimension of human wisdom. When wars between nations subside, things return to business as usual between human groups. Our collective war against nature proceeds unabated in feverish economies of greed and growth. Deserts advance under our hand and the rainforests burn at our bidding. As geologists and environmental archaeologists have emphasized, our most pervasive and enduring signature as a species in the geological record is already being written in dust and ashes. ❑

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